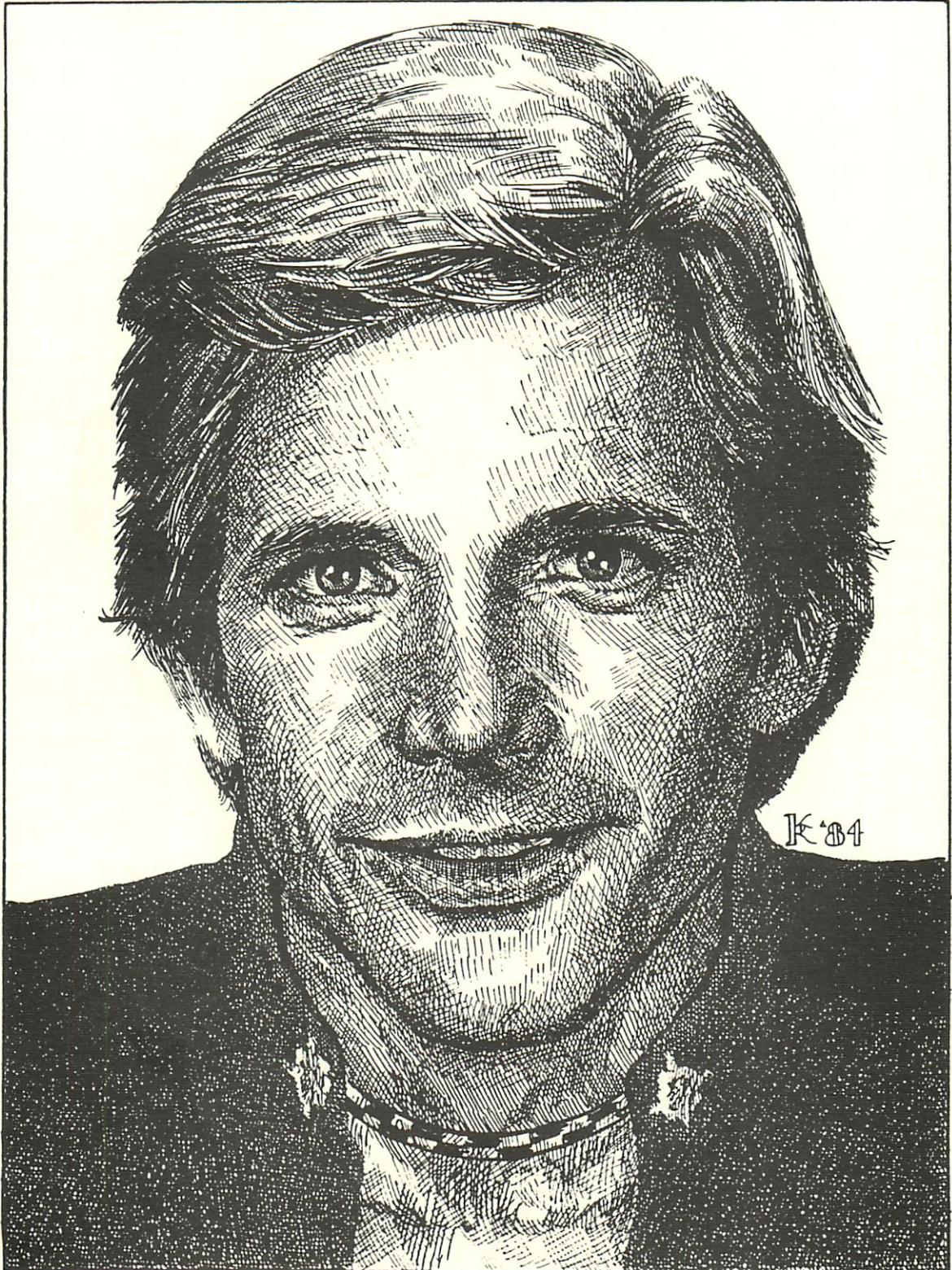


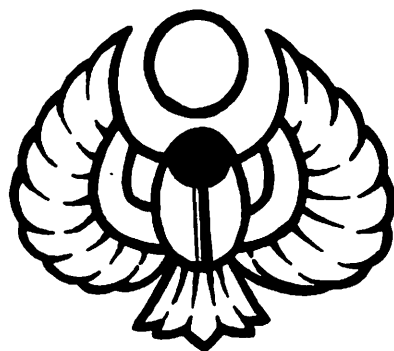
# MURMURS



*by Honore Bryte*

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## PROLOGUE

Once, a being who called himself Count Iblis came to the battlestar GALACTICA, offering to become the Saviour of Mankind. Captain Apollo, Commander Adama's son, was suspicious of the stranger, and defied him. For this defiance, Lieutenant Sheba, for whom the young Captain cared greatly, was condemned to die, that her lost soul might curse him for all Eternity. But it was Apollo whom Iblis struck down in his rage.

The entities who caused Iblis to flee after committing this murder offered to restore Apollo to his grieving friends -- for a price. Sheba and Lieutenant Starbuck volunteered their own lives as his ransom, but such sacrifice proved unnecessary. Calling the two Warriors "spirits of great promise," the entities of the mysterious Ship of Lights freely returned Apollo to them, alive and unharmed.

The GALACTICA continued on her course, in possession of possible coordinates to her destination, the planet Earth.

For Sheba, the day every Warrior dreads came all too soon -- she left on a mission from which she did not return. Apollo suffered the most at her early death, for he had come to love her since the day he died for her; and, but for a cruel quirk of fate, he would have been her wingmate on that ill-fated patrol.

He still carried that love and guilt in his heart when Iblis returned to take the vengeance he had sworn against the Captain. Apollo and Lieutenant Reisa, a complete innocent, were kidnapped and taken to die on an inhospitable world where the natives worshipped Iblis as a god, and where they freely carried out his commands (APOLLO'S ODYSSEY, OSIRIS Publications, 1981).

Starbuck sought desperately to reach his friends, certain he could somehow save them. He discovered Reisa's body, but could find no trace of Apollo. He stayed too long, and realized he was doomed only when the ancient world began to disintegrate around him in its death throes.

Caught in a volcanic eruption, unable to reach his ship, with no possibility of escape, Starbuck willed himself to face a fiery death -- then found himself safely returning to the GALACTICA, with no memories except the certain knowledge that Apollo was alive, somewhere, by some Power he could not fathom. That thought carried him through his subsequent illness, sustaining him despite the many suggestions that he had become insane from his ordeal.

The GALACTICA and her combat squadrons adjusted to Apollo's loss as they had been forced to adjust to so many other deaths since their escape from the Cylon-wrought Destruction. Lieutenant Boomer, promoted to Captain, took Apollo's position as Flight Commander, and Starbuck returned to the ranks of Blue Squadron...

*Reese*



PART I: PREMONITION OF DESTINY

Starbuck stared down at the table, shocked into silence, suddenly pale. The vague aches and pains that had finally forced him to Life Centre hadn't seemed anything too serious. Doctor Salik's words still seemed unreal, slowly sinking into his mind like the tentacles of some monstrous evil creature intent on destroying him from within. Setting his hands carefully on the table before him, palms down, he pushed himself to his feet, ignoring Cassiopeia's sobs behind him.

"Is there any chance of a mistake?" he tried to demand, his voice a husky whisper.

Salik sighed, then shook his head, himself shaken by the news he'd been forced to give the young Warrior. "I doubt it. If you like, we could run another series of tests, but I'm afraid the results would only be the same."

Knees falling him, Starbuck sat down again, his eyes moving to Cassie's tear-stained face. Her mute nod of agreement killed any hope he might have had. "How long?" he forced himself to ask.

"With proper care, probably several sectors, longer if the disease goes into remission," the doctor replied carefully. "Breakdown of the nervous system has already begun, however, and you shouldn't be flying any more..."

"But how could it come so fast?" Starbuck cried, hiding his face in his hands. "There was no trace at my last check-up..."

"I'm sorry, Starbuck, truly, I am. It happens this way sometimes. This degenerative nerve disease is one of the few we can't do much about, except delay the inevitable."

Starbuck shuddered. Inevitable. "But, so fast?" His voice pleaded for a reprieve of some kind. "Why? And why me? Isn't there anything you can do?"

"If there were, we'd be doing it already. Captain Boomer will have to know, so he can remove you from the flight roster."

"No!" Starbuck caught Salik's arm before the doctor could walk away. "No. I mean...I'll tell him. Please. Let me tell him, if he has to know. Can I have a few days? To put things in order, finish some things..."

The older man's voice was filled with gentle remonstrance. "Starbuck, he has to be told now. You shouldn't be flying any more. Your reflexes are already off, and it won't be long before they seriously impair your ability..." He broke off, realizing the significance of the look in Starbuck's eyes, the tone in his voice. "No, Starbuck. You may want to die in space, and let this die with you — but consider."

The doctor's voice dropped, but retained its intensity. "If you were to black out in battle, or lose control of your ship on patrol, you might kill someone else, too. Do you really want that hanging over you? Must someone else — one of your friends — share your death with you?" Starbuck looked away, silently shaking his head. Salik squeezed his shoulder, offering what

little comfort he had to give, then left the small chamber. The Lieutenant continued to stare at the blank wall before him.

Cassiopeia's sobs didn't penetrate his numbed brain until she put her arms around him and leaned her head on his shoulder. "I'm not sure I'm ready to die yet, Cassie," he murmured.

"Oh, Starbuck!" She turned, and ran from the room.

He watched her go. His eyes empty, lifeless, he stood in silence -- alone.

\* \* \* \* \*

Leaning back in his chair, a satisfied smile on his previously thoughtful features, Starbuck laid down his cards -- a perfect pyramid -- and took a drag on his cigar. "Well, gentlemen?"

"I don't believe it," the Libran Cadet breathed as he lowered his own hand, a respectable three-quarter pyramid.

Giles and Cree looked at each other in exasperation. The other participants in the game congratulated themselves on getting out when they had.

"All the yahrens we've known him," Giles muttered, "and we still keep on falling for that innocent look."

Starbuck modestly accepted their grudging compliment, and raked in his pile of cubits. Cree picked up the cards to deal the next hand, as Starbuck finished his smoke. The pilots who weren't playing, who were merely watching the game, leaned back for a few centons, discussing the game. Most of Blue Squadron was in the ready room, either watching the players or sitting in corners, minding their own business.

Athena leaned over Starbuck's shoulder. "Haven't you had enough pyramid yet?" she whispered in his ear. "I thought you wanted to go to the lounge." She planned to accompany him.

Starbuck smiled at her, considering the offer, but the thought of ambrosia suddenly turned his stomach. He frowned. "Just a few more hands, Athena."

She pouted, but stayed beside him.

His cards were less lucky on Cree's deal, and he'd already resigned himself to losing the hand when Colonel Tigh entered the ready room. The Executive Officer's forbidding gaze swept over the suddenly silent pilots, settling on Starbuck. "I'd like a word with you, Lieutenant." His voice was cold.

The pilots exchanged confused looks; they weren't aware of anything Starbuck might have done wrong -- at present. Starbuck himself quickly got to his feet to respond to the Colonel's "request."

"Deny everything!" Athena whispered implisly. He managed a quick grin in reply before Tigh's hand on his shoulder propelled him out of the room and across the corridor.

They entered Captain Boomer's quarters. Commander Adama was seated at the desk, while Boomer stood at the window port, staring into space, his face turned from Starbuck.

Oh, oh. Such a gathering for a reprimand? The blond Warrior's blood ran cold.

"Sit down, Starbuck," Adama ordered kindly. With a quick glance back at the Colonel, he obeyed. The Executive Officer's cold expression dissolved into compassion.

### They know...

"Yes, sir," he said aloud, sitting down and waiting, dreading the next few centons.

There was silence for a long moment before Adama broke it. "Why didn't you tell us?"

Starbuck's eyes dropped. "I meant to, sir," he mumbled, "but..." He couldn't continue; the words stuck in his throat, threatening to choke him. An eloquent shrug was all he could add.

"Doctor Salik told you two days ago. You should have spoken to Boomer immediately. You risked a Cadet's life on that patrol this morning." Adama's struggle to control his own emotions in an attempted reprimand was obvious.

"It was my last patrol, Commander. I...needed it. I...didn't think one more day...would make much difference."

"That's not the point, Lieutenant," Adama said quietly, his eyes closed as if in pain.

"Damn it, Starbuck!" Boomer turned abruptly to face him, and Starbuck could see the tears on his friend's face. "You didn't tell me! You didn't tell your friends! If Cassie hadn't come crying..." He turned away again, swinging his fist savagely at the wall.

Adama's voice again broke the tense silence. "You should have told Captain Boomer. He had a right to know, even if you didn't want the rest of the squadron told. He has a duty that your action makes all the more difficult."

The wretched mental anguish of the past two days caught up to Starbuck again, and he felt himself shaking. "Well, he knows now. I'm off the squadron. I'm out of everything. What do I do now? Check into Life Centre and wait, while everyone I care about stares at me and cries, and wonders if I'll last the day? I don't need that! I don't..."

"Lieutenant!" Tigh cut in sharply.

He broke off in mid-sentence and stared at the floor, shocked by the outburst from the normally calm Executive Officer. "I'm sorry, sir," he whispered.

Suddenly, their compassion tasted very bitter, and he got to his feet, forcing his features into an icy mask. "Is that all, sirs?"

The other men exchanged uncomfortable glances. Then Adama nodded. Starbuck strode from the room, his head held high.

"Captain Boomer?"

"Yes, Commander?"

"It's going to be hard to keep this from the men, but do what you can. Starbuck..." Adama's voice died away. Tigh and Boomer both stared out the port; he bowed his head sadly. "He'll appreciate it, I think. Lords... We've lost so many...Zac, Serina, Apollo, all the others...and now this. Starbuck..."



\* \* \* \* \*

The workout felt good. The exercise and a turboshower put Starbuck in a better mood than he'd been in for a section. Except for that slight twinge, and those passing moments of weakness...

"Hi, Starbuck."

He jumped. Boomer stood in the doorway.

He looked away as he pulled on his shirt. "Hi, Boomer. I suppose you've got everything taken care of."

"I'm sorry about this."

The Lieutenant shrugged. "It's not like you could do anything about it, Captain. Like the doctor said, it just came from nowhere. I suppose my luck had to run out sometime."

Boomer sat down on a bench, watching him intently. "What're you planning on doing?"

"Oh, thought I'd start with a night on the RISING STAR, if that's all right with you," was the flippant reply; Boomer winced. "You have anything better in mind?"

"That's not what I meant. I meant..."

"While I'm waiting to die? C'mon, Boomer, you can do better than that!"

"I'm sorry, Starbuck."

"And I said there's nothing to be sorry about. So would you just cut it out and stop staring at me as if I'll keel over any micron?" He fled the locker room.

"Damn it, Starbuck!" Boomer swore. "Would you just let us tell you we care?"

\* \* \* \* \*

Starbuck sat morosely in one corner of the shuttle, alone, in civilian garb, ignoring the cheerful buzz of conversation around him. He'd already imbibed enough ambrosia to cloud his senses. Leaning back in his seat, he watched his fellow passengers during the short ride to the pleasure ship. It seemed to be a holiday; everyone was dressed in finery, laughing and happy.

Except me...

He hadn't planned on making the trip alone. But when he'd seen Cassiopela, he could tell she was trying her best to hide her tears, and wasn't succeeding very well; he'd walked out on her. And when he'd seen Athena, her eyes were swollen and red -- the Commander had told her the bad news; he couldn't bear her tears any better than Cassie's, so he'd left her alone, too. And there wasn't anyone else he even wanted with him, not tonight. If this was to be his last fling, he intended to make the most of it.

"Mind if I sit here?"

He looked up to see a slender woman with piercing blue eyes; her long, dark hair was pulled back, and fell in soft ringlets. In a gauzy, silvery gown, she looked very young, although her eyes held a strange maturity. Starbuck felt a stirring of interest, but squelched it immediately; the

last thing he needed tonight was an innocent girl following him around. He gestured at the empty seat and turned away. He never saw her penetrating gaze or understanding smile.

Aboard the RISING STAR, Starbuck made a bee-line for the main gambling hall. In moments, he'd found himself a good spot at a pyramid hi-lo table, and an attractive woman with short blonde hair had attached herself to his side.

"Your luck seems very good tonight," the blonde purred after he won an especially large pot.

He smiled charmingly, his head somewhat cleared by the passage of a centar. He considered her possible willingness later in the night.

"You must be a good luck charm," he finally responded. "Think I could convince you to get us a couple of drinks?"

"Love to," she replied with an alluring smile, and reached for a pair of cubits. Within centons, she had returned, with two elegant goblets filled with golden liquid. He took one without a word, and she settled at his side.

The dealer picked up the cards. "Do you realize," the woman murmured, "you still haven't told me your name?"

"I'm Starbuck. And you're...?" He glanced at her. Her eyes were cold, empty, and he felt a sudden chill. Yes, she'd be willing -- but the sudden distaste he felt told Starbuck that he wouldn't be.

"Lilith," she answered, her fingers resting lightly on his arm.

He picked up his cards. Neither of them noticed the frown on the face of the dark-haired young woman in the silvery gown, who watched them from across the glittering lounge. She never spoke, never played, only watched Starbuck with compassion in her eyes. Such was the aura about her that none of the inebriated pleasure-seekers in the room even approached her.

Another centar of hi-lo and small talk with the fair-haired woman had Starbuck gritting his teeth. He couldn't understand his reaction to what she offered -- but he didn't want it. A few more centons, and he decided he'd had enough.

"Well, I think I've had it for the evening," he said, briskly collecting the large pile of cubits spread before him.

Lilith took his arm. "Enough of cards, perhaps, but are you sure you're finished for the evening? With everything?" Light fingers brushed along his jaw as she rested her small oval chin against his shoulder.

Casually, deliberately, Starbuck pulled out a large golden cubit.

"Thanks for the entertainment," he said, smiling, as he pressed the money between her full lips. The sudden rage in her icy blue eyes almost made him laugh. "I'll be seeing you." He turned, and walked away through the crowd.

Alone again, he found himself a dark corner in one of the entertainment lounges. The singer was good, and her soft ballad soothed his mind. In the darkness, among strangers, he felt less uneasy. He took a sip from the glass before him.





Empty, he thought. It was all so empty. Drinking, gambling, Lilit -- all empty. It didn't mean much, and it left no feeling inside. Is there any meaning to anything I've done?

"I remember you. You were on the shuttle." It was the girl/woman in the ethereal silvery gown; she stood before his table, almost glowing in the dim light. "Are you here alone, too?"

Starbuck managed a cold smile. "Sit down, if you like."

She did so, gliding into the chair opposite him. She said no more, simply watched him, with blue eyes he found incredibly luminous.

"Uh, can I get you a drink?" he asked after several centons of silence, seeing a waitress hovering nearby in anticipation.

"That would be very kind of you."

He gestured to the woman with the tray of assorted liquors. As long as she was there, he grabbed a refill for himself.

"You don't seem to be celebrating," his companion said. He didn't see the sympathy in her large, incredibly wise eyes; he did see her warm smile as she took the goblet he offered her.

"Why should I?" he asked, recklessly draining his first drink in one long swallow.

"Everyone else seems so happy. It's a celebration, after all, supposedly the birth date of the First Lord of Kobol."

"I don't care about the Lords. It's no celebration for me."

"Oh." She turned to watch the singer. A cascade of her curls, bound with small white gems, fell off her shoulder. She had a lovely profile, and somehow, Starbuck felt better just having her sit at his table.

"That song -- It's Caprican, isn't it? The Capricans have always had the wisest acceptance of death, and an understanding of its place in life," she commented, her eyes and voice far away.

Starbuck listened carefully to the words. Yes, an old song, about a woman's love for a dead man. Sad, but appropriate. His clouded brain sought for something to say, but he couldn't think of anything appropriate.

"You must not have been born on Caprica," he said at last, awkwardly.

"No, nor on any of the Twelve Worlds." She smiled back at him.

"Space-born, then?"

"Yes." She seemed amused.

He felt the inanity of his comments growing worse. If he didn't say something clever or charming soon, she'd leave -- and, much to his surprise, he found he wanted her to stay.

"You haven't told me your name," he said, cursing inwardly. Hopeless, Starbuck, hopeless...

"You haven't told me yours," she countered.

"I'm Starbuck." He extended a hand -- and knocked over one of the goblets, spilling her still untouched drink across the table. "Oh, I'm terribly sorry... I'm clumsy tonight..." In more ways than one...

She jumped back. "It's all right. It didn't spill on me. But the table's a mess..."

Starbuck stood up as she did. "Would you like to change tables, or maybe go somewhere else?" He held his breath.

She seemed about to turn away, angry, then stopped and gazed at him thoughtfully. "I think I'd like to talk to you," she said softly. "Is there somewhere we can go that's private?"

His mind reeled. "I'll find a place," he promised.

In a moment, he'd located a waiter, obtained the key to a private room, and was leading the woman there. He didn't realize he still didn't know her name.

Once they'd reached their destination, Starbuck nearly collapsed on a pile of cushions. The woman smiled and walked to the viewport, gazing out at the stars and the Fleet before glancing about the chamber at her surroundings.

It was a simple, yet exotic, room, reminiscent of something from old Arles. The dominant colour was a muted blue. Gauze curtains barely concealed a sleeping chamber, and the antechamber in which they found themselves contained a pair of short-legged tables, several piles of thick cushions, and a simple free-form sculpture surrounded by moving lights in subdued shades of blue and dim white.

Several centons later, a waiter delivered the ambrosia Starbuck had ordered. The Warrior pulled himself back to his feet to pour the potent liquor into crystalline chalices.

"Would you like one?"

She took the glass, then settled among the blue cushions, alongside him.

"You look like you belong there," he said shakily, "a soft cloud in a clear Caprican sky."

She lowered her eyes in acknowledgement of the compliment, then spoke. "Tell me about yourself, Starbuck."

He shrugged, and looked away from her, his eyes finally settling on the sculpture, watching the play of lights across it. "There isn't much to tell. I was born on Caprica, grew up there with my foster parents, attended the Academy, became a Warrior, and joined the Fleet. I was lucky enough to survive the Destruction and hook up with the GALACTICA again, and I've been here ever since. Tell me about you, now."

"You don't seem pleased with what you've done with your life."

Starbuck stared into his glass, and the woman watched intently. He was too drunk to realize she hadn't answered a single one of his questions all evening.

"I guess not," he finally muttered, as reluctantly as if she'd dragged the admission from him.

"Why?"

"I feel like everything's just begun; and now, it's all over, for me..."

"What do you mean?"

"Damn it!" he exploded in response to her insistence, forcing himself back to his feet. "I didn't mean that. I didn't mean this at all. I didn't bring you here to tell you my troubles."

"What is your trouble?" she probed again.

"You really wanna know? I'm a dead man, just like in the song. I'm sick, and I'm dying, and it doesn't matter because I haven't done anything with my life, and now, I never will. How's that for bluntness?" He trembled, a combination of alcohol, illness, and fear.

"And what are you doing to change it?" she asked, as calmly as before.

"Huh?" He stared at her.

"You drink, you gamble, you take your pleasure where you can."

"So?" he demanded angrily. "It's my life, isn't it? I can do what I want with it, can't I?"

She seemed hurt. "True. You can do what you wish. Your life is almost over, and you fear you've done nothing, but you won't try to change it. Very well. If that is your choice, I won't stand in your way." She crossed the room with light, flowing steps; her fingers were on the door panel before Starbuck found words to speak.

"No!" he called softly. She stopped, and he stood beside her, pulling her hand from the switch. "Please. I didn't mean to make you angry. I want to talk to you. I need to talk to somebody." There was a hint of tears in his eyes.

"Very well, Starbuck, if that is your choice."

"My choice? If I had a choice, I wouldn't be dying."

"Do you fear death so?"

Unable to look into her compassionate eyes any longer, he sat gingerly on one of the low tables. "I've lived with death all my life, especially since I became a Warrior. I don't understand why it seems so terrible now. Maybe it's just the way people keep looking at me, and pitying me. I can't take it. Death in space is quick, and you become a hero. But this...this is slow, and... it's what I fear."

"Other people's compassion? Your friends' concern for you?"

"I don't know any more." His drink tipped over on the thick carpet; neither of them noticed. He ran a hand through his hair, got up, and went to sit on the cushions. The woman sat beside him, and took his other hand.

"You've lived with death, but you've never faced its definite place in your life. You have to consider it, Starbuck. All men die."

"I know. I'm dying." His voice was hopeless. He lay back among the pillows.





"Would you change things if you had the time?"

"I don't know." He tried to sit up. His head swam, and he gave up. "I'm not sure what I'd change, or how things would be different. I just know I don't feel ready to die."

"Maybe you aren't, now. But will you be when the time comes? Can you accept death with tranquillity, and face the ultimate judgement it brings? I hope so, Starbuck. Other lives may depend on it." There was something urgent in her voice and eyes, and in the gentle pressure of her fingers on his hand.

He found the strength to sit up. "Who are you?" he asked again. "I don't understand..."

"You were so willing to pay the final price when Apollo died, and you were willing to sacrifice yourself to follow him through the fire. His spirit has been with you for many yahrens. Can you live up to the promise you have within yourself? To the promise you have given to others? Have you learned, Starbuck?"

He could sense an intense yearning in her, a hope... For me? "I don't understand," he said falteringly. "How can you know...?"

"What would you choose? Your spirit craves life."

"I don't know..." He felt awe and terror building within himself. "Can you help me?"

"Will you accept my help without fear or shame?" She looked directly into his soul. "You would accept Apollo's help..."

He couldn't help it. Taking her face gently between his hands, he kissed her forehead. Her lips were too sacred.

He didn't have the courage to do anything more. She was beautiful. She was wise. She knew things nobody else could. And he trusted her. She could help him.

"You deserve the time, Starbuck," she said softly. "There is much good in you, and so much life still to live, so much still to learn. This is not an easy test, but I think you will pass it, and be ready for the crucible when the time comes."

"For now, lie down and sleep. Sleep has always been a great healer for the body and mind."

He lay back and gazed up at her for a moment, his senses swimming in ambrosia and something greater, something he couldn't define, something in his mind and heart. "I think I love you," he whispered. Then he was asleep, a deep and dreamless rest.

The woman smiled as she passed her hand over his forehead. "Yes, Starbuck, you shall have the time. You will pass the tests, and come from the crucible a better man for them. Once, you offered your life to call Apollo back from death. Now, you must face death again. Soon, you will have to face what will be worse than death for you. But I will be there, Starbuck, when the test is hard, when you aren't sure."

"Don't be too proud to accept the help of your friends, Starbuck. They, too, have known pain, and they care for you, as I do. Farewell, gentle love."

Then she was gone, somehow passing through the walls to soar away among the stars in a momentary



mel. white  
4/28/84



flare of light, a ball of life energy, then nothing.

Starbuck slept peacefully, a faint aura glowing softly around his body for long centons before it, too, was gone, and only starlight illuminated the quiet chamber.

\* \* \* \* \*

Starbuck groaned, clasping his hands to his aching head.

"So you're still here."

He opened bleary eyes, wincing at the sound of the rasping voice. Doctor Salik stood over him. He looked around. He was in a chamber in Life Centre.

"Wha...? Owwww!"

"Captain Boomer and Lieutenant Jolly brought you in a few centars ago. You'll be all right." The doctor's voice held no sympathy for the agony throbbing through him.

"Did I really drink that much?" Starbuck moaned.

"We didn't know it was the drinking. Your friends were afraid you'd tried something else."

Starbuck stared. "You thought I'd try to kill myself?"

Salik shrugged, his face harsh. "Who knows what you're thinking or doing these days? You walk away from everyone who tries to talk to you." The doctor left the stunned Warrior to contemplate his monstrous hangover.

Boomer entered the chamber a few centons later, interrupting Starbuck's attempt to return to merciful sleep. He settled himself at the bedside, gravely waiting for his friend to notice. After a few moments, deciding Boomer wasn't going to leave, Starbuck opened his eyes.

"Hi, Captain. I hear you had me dragged in here like some nut case with a thing for self-destruction."

"You sure you're not a nut case?"

"Oh."

"If you want to talk, Starbuck, I'm here. If not, I'll go away. But I won't waste my time and yours trying to talk sense to an idiot."

"Good. I don't have much time to waste." The wry comment had the wrong effect, as Boomer, his face frozen, rose to leave. "Boomer, wait."

"Why?"

"I...think I wanna talk. I'm sorry."

"Sorry for what?" The Captain sat down again.

"How'd you find me, anyway?" Starbuck asked, ignoring his own words thrown back at him.

"You think we'd let you get drunk by yourself, in your condition? A couple of us went looking for you -- Jolly, BoJay, Greenbean, a couple guys from the squadron. One of the waiters on the RISING STAR said you'd taken a room for the night. We didn't want to intrude, but he said you were alone, and that didn't sound very good. Then we found you lying there like you were already half dead, so we brought you here. We couldn't wake you."

"Huh?" Fuzzy though his mind might be, Starbuck knew for a fact that he remembered a young woman from somewhere in the night. Somehow, though, her face seemed just a hazy mist...

"That's what I thought," Boomer replied with a smile, disturbing Starbuck's attempt to place the strange female in his memory. "But, there you were, passed out, with ambrosia all over the carpet, all by yourself."

"Maybe you're right. I thought I remembered a girl, but I can't seem to place anything about her. Hmmm..." Starbuck frowned.

There was a commotion at the door, and the lights suddenly became too bright. Starbuck hadn't realized they'd been on a dim setting until the blaze momentarily blinded him.

"Frak!" he complained loudly, then yelped in unexpected pain.

"Sorry," the med tech said as she pulled a needle out of his arm. "A pain-killer. Doctor Salik thought you'd be ready for it by now." The woman was gone before Starbuck could think of her name. When he could see again, Boomer was grinning wickedly at him.

"Why'd he wait so long?" he called after the departing tech.

"Must be losing your touch, Bucko."

"Must be," he replied ruefully.

Boomer grinned back at him, then sighed. "I wish there were something I could say. I hate seeing this happen to you, or anybody." He took Starbuck's hand. "It's that much harder when it's a friend, someone you care about."

Starbuck looked down, nodding. "It would be easier to die in space. A moment you don't remember, and the pain's over. This way, I have to watch myself, and it's for sectors, not microns." His eyes were far away. "So much better in space..."

Boomer knew the cause of his friend's distant expression. "Apollo?"

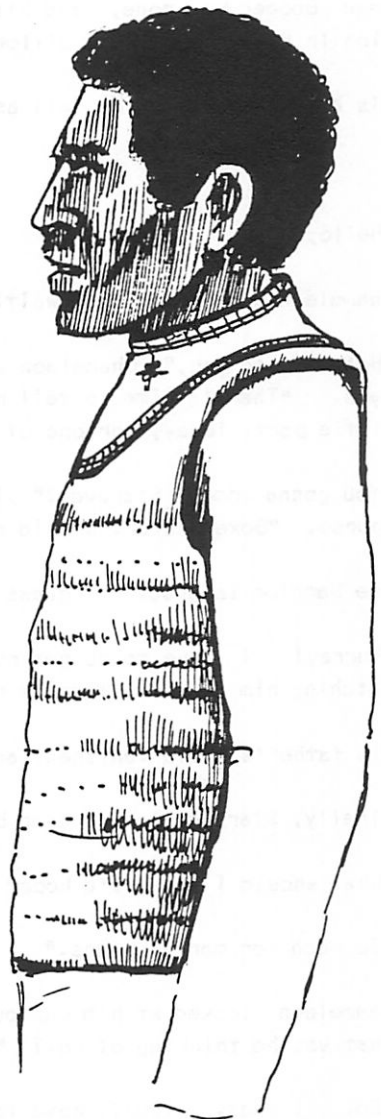
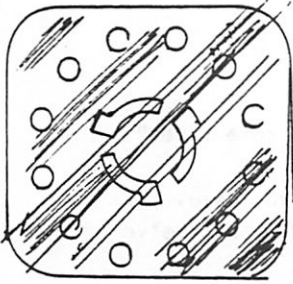
"We don't know he's dead," Starbuck insisted immediately.

"We don't know he's alive," came the quick counter. "Whichever, he's gone, and we mourned him, in his time. Now, we have to mourn you... I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said that."

"It doesn't matter," his friend said softly. "It's nice to know somebody'll care enough to miss me."

"We all care."

Starbuck knew better than to look at the other man. The words were choked with tears, and he didn't want to see Boomer cry. There'd been enough tears...



mel. O'Keefe

"I know, Boomer. Maybe I've just been too afraid to let you care, 'cause then I'd have to face it myself. Dying isn't exactly something I've been looking forward to."

"Nobody looks forward to dying."

"No, I guess not," he said thoughtfully. "Though it's something we all have to face, some time."

The two men sat in companionable silence for a while. Finally, Boomer knew he had to leave. "I have a patrol," he said. "Picked up some strange energy reading last night, Cree did, and we've been trying to figure it out..."

"Sure, I understand," Starbuck replied huskily. "Maybe there'll be time for some pyramid later?"

"Yeah. Be in the lounge with ready cubits."

"You know it. I'll be there. Thanks."

Then Boomer was gone, and Starbuck could take the deep breath he needed to relieve the constriction in his throat. The pillow absorbed his tears and muffled the soft sobs.

His headache eased. He fell asleep again.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Hello, Father. Hi, kid."

Chameleon and Dillon were waiting for him. The little boy promptly jumped into Starbuck's arms.

"He's missed you," Chameleon said reproachfully. Starbuck looked up quickly, a question in his eyes. "There's time to tell him, and Boxey, later," the old man said softly. "They're having a little party today, for one of their friends who's having a birthday."

"You gonna come, Starbuck?" Dillon asked eagerly, his eyes wide and pleading for a positive response. "Boxey said I should ask you. Say yes."

The Warrior laughed. "I guess I have to, then. I haven't seen either you or Boxey in a section."

"Hurray! I have to go get ready." The boy squirmed free and dashed merrily down the corridor. Watching him fondly, Starbuck had to smile again.

His father's smile vanished, and they walked in silence for a while.

Finally, Starbuck took a deep breath. "Nothing to say, Father?"

"What should I say? I'd hoped you would outlive me, and raise my surrogate grandson."

"So much for mortal plans."

Chameleon looked at him curiously. His son had refused to see him for the entire past section; what was he thinking of now? "Did I miss something?"

"No. I was. You'll have to take good care of the kid, you know. Doesn't look like I'll be here." Starbuck's tone was thoughtful.

"You've accepted it." His sorrow was creeping out, despite the old man's best efforts. There was sadness — and yet, relief.

"I can't really deny it any more. The doctor did a double test, and he probably scanned me again last night, when I was too drunk to stop him. It sounds like just a matter of time, now."

They entered the turbolift to the launch bay. Dillon was already hanging over the edge, waiting for them, making faces at someone they couldn't see.

"This won't be easy for Cassie, either. She loves you." Chameleon had always been fond of the pretty blonde med tech, and had secretly hoped for the day she and his son would be sealed.

"So does Athena. So do you. My attitude these past few days must've been hellish for you." They reached the shuttle, where the impatient Dillon waited.

"You're the one with the burden," his father said quietly.

The two men strapped in. The boy ran forward; he knew the shuttle pilot, and thought he could get away with watching the launch from the co-pilot's seat.

"Only for a little while," Starbuck replied. "You're the ones who have to live with it." Then, with an abrupt change of subject, he said, "I met a girl last night. I don't remember much about her, but I want to find her again. She said some things that really got me thinking..."

Their conversation came to an end when the co-pilot dragged a mutinous Dillon back to the passenger compartment and ordered Starbuck to strap him in. Then they were on their way. Even oblique references to Starbuck's illness were out of the question, as the small boy monopolized their attention with his party plans.

\* \* \* \* \*

The gathering was a huge success. In addition to the score or more children constantly underfoot, there were a lot of adults Starbuck knew. The Commander had taken time to attend with Boxey; since his son's death, he'd been far more attentive to the youngster, spending time with him whenever possible. A number of pilots were present, too, including the birthday girl's parents. Fruit punch flowed freely, and a pyramid game — played for small candied sweets — rapidly proved that Dillon was the same compulsive gambler as his foster father.

The party had already begun to break up when a call came from the GALACTICA. Starbuck was to report back to Life Centre, and Boomer, as well. They hurried to catch a shuttle.

"Maybe it's going faster than the doctors expected," Starbuck wondered aloud, quickly pushing aside a momentary flare-up of his old dread. He would take whatever time he had left.

"That wouldn't be fair," Boomer replied.

"I'm beginning to think nothing in this universe is fair," his friend retorted.

Back aboard the battlestar, in Life Centre, a strangely controlled Cassiopeia grabbed Starbuck and quickly steered him into an examination room. Boomer was left standing alone until Doctor Paye hurried by.

"Doctor, what is it?" he demanded, grabbing the medical officer's arm before he could disappear. "What's wrong this time?"

"We're not sure. We'll have to wait for final corroboration, but there may have been a mistake in Starbuck's check-up results."

"What?"

"Don't ask me. Doctor Salik and I double-checked the first time, but this morning's scan is mighty peculiar. So, we've got to try it again."

"For what?" Boomer demanded. "Peculiar how? How important can it be?"

Paye stared him down. "I think his life is important enough to warrant double-checking a possible problem with the diagnosis."

The Captain was stunned into momentary silence. Was Starbuck right, and the disease proceeding faster than expected? "What do you mean?"

"I don't understand it myself. This morning's examination didn't show any trace of nerve damage, showed no sign of disease. There's a problem somewhere, and we've got to find it. We've already checked out all our equipment..."

It began to sink in. "The diagnosis may have been wrong?"

"I don't see how, but..."

Boomer's whoop of joy resounded through Life Centre.

"Boomer, please!" Cassiopela hurried into the room. "Doctor Paye, he's ready for the secondary nerve tissue scan."

The doctor left, and Boomer stared at Cassie's trembling smile and shining eyes. "Is it true?"

She took a deep breath before answering. "I hope so. I pray so." Then she followed the doctor, leaving Boomer alone.

He sat down on the nearest chair. "Starbuck, I'm praying for you, too. Oh, Lords, if you've ever granted miracles, do so now..."

It was a very long centar before Starbuck emerged from the examination chamber. There was a huge, elated grin on his face, and Cassiopela was clinging to his arm, her eyes bright. Doctors Paye and Salik were behind them, puzzled but pleased.

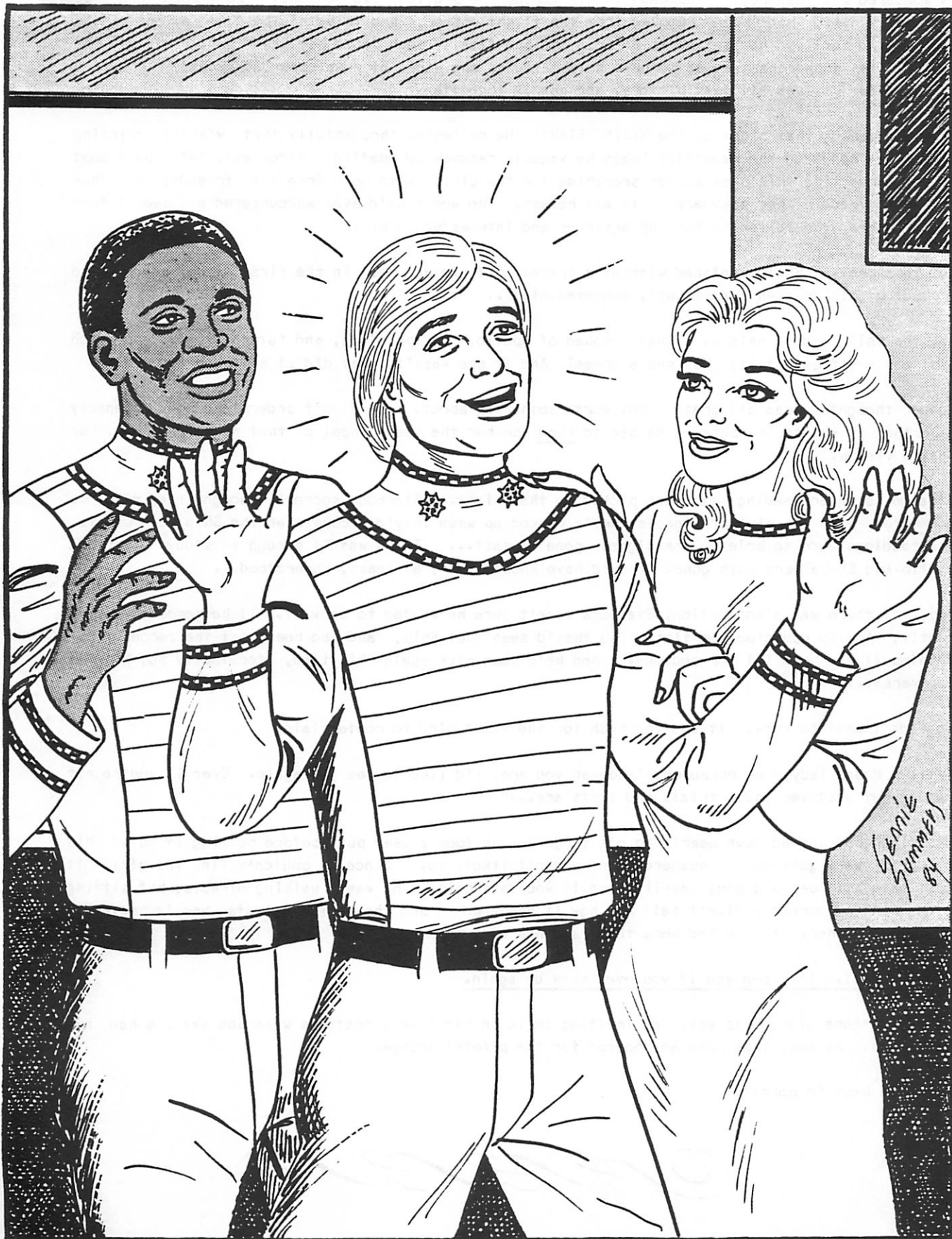
"Starbuck?" Boomer could read the verdict on all their faces, but he needed to hear it.

"I'm all right, Boomer! I'm gonna be okay!"

Their laughter and joy echoed through the corridors, filling both the pilots' lounge and the ready room as Starbuck happily rejoined Blue Squadron.

\* \* \* \* \*

Starbuck sat alone in a quiet corner of the ready room, a cigar in one hand, his chin resting on his other palm. He'd been invited to join a card game, but had refused, preferring to spend a little time thinking.





He wondered what had really happened to him during the previous two sections. He'd been declared terminally ill, had been removed from the flight roster, had tried his best to alienate his friends and family, had failed to do so, and had finally been found healthy -- which all of the GALACTICA's squadrons seemed to have celebrated in one Hades of a welcome-back party. Now, a section later, it was all past history, and nearly forgotten.

What happened that night on the RISING STAR? He reflected thoughtfully that wishful thinking might have conjured the beautiful image he vaguely remembered meeting. After all, he'd spent most of his free time this past section searching for the girl, with help from his friends, but had found no trace of her anywhere. In all honesty, no woman he'd ever encountered and been interested in had ever failed to turn up again -- and interested in him.

But this one... She'd vanished without a trace. If she was real in the first place, and not the product of his drunken and slightly demented mind...

And the things she'd said... She'd spoken of Apollo, and promises, and future trials. How much was real -- if any of it? Was she a dream? And if she wasn't, what did it all mean for him?

Boomer thought it was all crazy, not worth bothering about. He didn't understand how intensely important it was to Starbuck. He had to know whether the sweet angel of that night was real, or only a vision.

Strange scanner readings had been picked up that night. Starbuck secretly thought they might be connected with the similar signals they'd picked up when they'd encountered the Ship of Lights. The readings were so brief, the signals gone so fast... There wasn't enough to study. Too bad Apollo and Sheba were both gone. They'd have known -- or, at least, understood...

But, if there was a connection, Starbuck wasn't sure he wanted to know it. If he remembered correctly, Apollo had died the first time they'd seen that Ship, and had been lost the second time. He himself had been ill for sections. And he'd been sick again this time, terminally so, but had recovered...

He didn't want to know. It was too much for the human mind to contemplate.

"Well, dream lady," he murmured, "whoever you are, I'd like to see you again. Even if you're not real. But whatever those trials and tests are..."

His cigar had burned down nearly to his fingers; he took a deep puff before putting it out. His thoughts were getting him nowhere, and weren't likely to. Since he couldn't find the girl, it must have all been a dream; dwelling on it wouldn't help. He was a walking miracle, but sitting alone in a corner wouldn't tell him how it happened -- and the medical tests hadn't revealed anything, either. All he had were the fragments of a memory...

Sorry, Angel. I'll see you if you ever show up again.

He saw Athena glance his way, an inviting smile on her lovely features when she saw she had his attention. As one, they rose and headed for the pilots' lounge.

Life was back to normal.



## INTERLUDE

Violent death was a fact of life for the GALACTICA's pilots. Although Starbuck had survived a great deal since the Destruction, his own turn at death came, so he thought, when his Viper was damaged in a Cylon attack. Unable to return to his base ship, he was left behind as the GALACTICA continued on her way. He found refuge on a cold and empty world.

Injured, desperate, and perhaps half-mad, he knew he couldn't survive alone. He reconstructed one of his Cylon adversaries, and the two of them began to work on the problem of survival.

Then she came.

She said her name was Angela. She had the face of the woman who had haunted his dreams ever since his near-fatal illness. And she claimed the child she carried was somehow his.

More Cylons came. Starbuck sent Angela and her son -- his spiritual child -- to safety in a makeshift vessel. Then he and his Cylon companion, called Cy, faced their enemies -- and won.

But Cy was shot down, and Starbuck was alone again, feeling more desolate than ever before in his life.

He had to go on. He searched for and found the ship the Cylons had arrived in, and began to make the necessary modifications for a human pilot. He also managed to repair his Cylon friend. Together, they left the planet the Warrior had named for himself, not knowing where they could go, but certain that any place was better than where they were ("Picking Up and Taking Off," PURPLE AND ORANGE? #9, 1981).

It took time, and many assorted perils and adventures, but Starbuck and Cy eventually encountered another friendly vessel, the OSIRIS -- although they were nearly killed when that ship's pilots mistook their Raider for an enemy craft.

The OSIRIS was a Colonial battlestar. Carrying a mixed crew of Warriors and civilian scientific specialists, she had been engaged in deep star exploration at the time of the Destruction. She returned to find the Colonies in ruins; collecting what survivors she could, she began a lonely -- and perhaps futile -- quest for the GALACTICA.

Aboard the OSIRIS, Starbuck's enduring faith was rewarded. Apollo was still alive. The exploring battlestar had been drawn to study a dying world -- Iblis' world -- and the daring young Sergeant Arlon had located and rescued the injured GALACTICA pilot.

Starbuck rejoined his friends ("Shades of the Past," PURPLE AND ORANGE? #9, 1981).

He was among humans again, and some were friends from earlier in his life. Among them was Captain Diana of Purple Squadron, Apollo's foster sister and the love of his youth. They were sealed soon after Starbuck's arrival.

Also aboard was Sergeant Alexandra, a woman Starbuck had known very well indeed at the Caprican

Academy. It was easy for both of them to fall back into their old relationship, although neither truly expected it to be permanent.

There were other old friends, and the outgoing Starbuck quickly made new ones, settling easily into a familiar routine, with only the names and faces changed. Like the people of the Fleet, the OSIRIS crew were all survivors of a devastating war, although, in search of a haven, their dream went more often by the name of GALACTICA.

Starbuck never forgot the things Angela told him on their lonely world, and he secretly worried when he reviewed them in his mind. Occasionally, he would wake at night, shaking from dreams where he relived past events -- although his worst nightmares were born of the future she had predicted for him.

He had offered his life to the beneficent entities of the Ship of Lights, but they hadn't taken it. When Iblis stole Apollo a second time, he'd faced death again -- a painful death he could have avoided, but was willing to risk for his friends. That, at least, would have been quick.

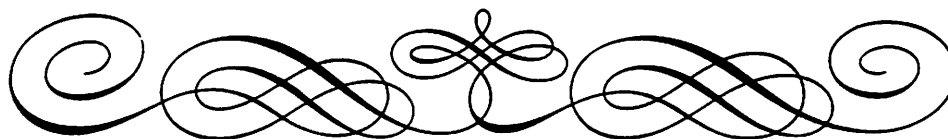
The stark future and inevitable pain of his illness had been worse, and only the counsel of a dream woman -- or had Angela been there, too, with her promise of comfort and aid? -- had enabled him to face it.

Then, on an empty world, the thought of spending the rest of his life completely alone, without warmth or love, had seemed the very worst thing that could happen to any man -- yet he had sent the woman and child away, and had lived through the terrible days which followed, resigned at last to eternal loneliness.

It hadn't been eternal -- fortunately, he thought. He had escaped, to find comfort and a degree of happiness among his own kind again -- but occasionally, he couldn't help brooding. The final judgement Angela had spoken of, the promise she'd said his spirit held, the learning he'd done -- he still didn't know what it all meant. It seemed to lead to some dark and terrible future...

He'd faced Judgement Day, and survived. But what were the results? He was left to wonder, as time passed slowly, as life continued...

What comes after Judgement Day?



## PART II: THE HUMAN SPIRIT

Starbuck felt cool fingers moving along his jaw, and smiled as he slowly came awake to the sleek female body beside his bed.

"Ummm...morning, Cassie..." he murmured.

"Cassie?" the woman repeated in an outraged voice.

Starbuck got the distinct impression that those delightful fingers on his jaw were curling into a fist. He opened his eyes in surprise.

Not Cassie. Not even the right ship. Those dreams again... "Uh, hi, Aley." She continued to stare at him, piqued; he forced a smile. "How'd you get in...? Uh, never mind. I think I know. Still at your old tricks, I see."

"Yes," she replied firmly, neither voice nor expression offering any comfort.

You blew it, Starbuck, he told himself. That stupid argument a section ago, and she hasn't forgiven me yet... "Were you...looking for something in particular?" he finally asked.

She shrugged. "I was under the impression, from something somebody said, that I'd be welcome here. Perhaps I was wrong and should leave..."

"No, don't do that. You're a very nice sight to wake up to."

"Before or after you figured out who I am?" she retorted uncompromisingly.

Starbuck sat up, leaning on one elbow as Alexandra settled back in her chair. She was wearing a voluminous, multi-coloured robe or tunic of sorts, covered with floral designs. He was wearing a sheet. They studied each other in silence.

"You haven't changed much," Alexandra said at last. "A little older, but then, we're not the kids we were at the Academy. More mature, I guess, in some ways, but that's about the only difference." Starbuck was about to nod in affirmation, wondering at her choice of topics, when she added, "The same in other ways. I saw the way you were flirting with Lavanna when she checked you out of Life Centre."

"Hey!" he protested. "We knew each other back at the Academy! You know that!"

"You knew every girl at the Academy; that's the problem. Knowing Lavanna, I can guess just how well you knew her, too."

She was teasing him, and he knew it. He felt relieved; the quarrel was obviously over. "About as well as I knew you," he replied, grinning.

"That well, huh? You intending to pick up that relationship where it left off?"

He shrugged. "I'm still relatively new in town. I need all the friends I can get."

Alexandra shook her head, laughing. "You're not new any more! You're the same old Starbuck!"

He laughed with her. "Mind if I ask where you got that...whatever it is you're wearing? I'd swear it's got two miles of sleeve on either end!"

She lifted one arm, draping long folds of cloth over the chair. "Like it? It's Hsarri, their standard off-duty wear, according to Arzigal. They're quite comfortable, bright and colourful, and everybody in Cultural Survey fell in love with them the first time Arzigal displayed one."

"Oh," Starbuck chuckled. "Have they caught on?"

"Mostly with pregnant women, since they're so easy to get around in, but some of the civilians are especially fond of them. Fornax wears one occasionally, to cover the leg brace he's had to wear since the accident. He gets around fine, but I think he's a little vain about it..."

"Oh." Starbuck continued to inspect the gleaming material.

"Planning on attending the triad game today? Apollo and Morgan are the best in our squadron; they're defending Purple's honour against a pair of engineering types from Green."

"Mmmm, sounds good. But that won't be for several centars." His voice dropped a little deeper. "Until then...not to change the subject or anything, Alek, but...how does that thing come off?"

"Starbuck!" Some things never changed.

\* \* \* \* \*

The final buzzer sounded, and the mockery of a triad game was over at last. There weren't a lot of people in the crowd who'd bet on Green Squadron's team, but they were quite vocal in their support of the winners. Most of the spectators were too amazed to say much of anything.

In the locker room, a still-breathless Morgan dropped onto the nearest bench, and looked up at his team-mate. "What in Hades happened to us? We didn't do anything right!"

"I know," Apollo agreed. "I don't understand it, either. Fobos and Darius shouldn't have been that good -- and we should never have been that bad! We've had off days before, but nothing like this!"

"You know the worst of it?" Morgan asked in a conspiratorial tone.

Apollo's eyebrows lifted inquiringly, and he shoved his sweat-dampened hair out of his eyes.

"The way the game was going, I tried to 'fix' it a little, just enough so it wouldn't be a complete fiasco. I broke one of my own rules -- and it didn't help a bit!"

"Probably serves you right." Apollo straddled the bench alongside his exhausted partner. "Well, we can always say it's Diana's fault."

This time, it was Morgan's turn to be puzzled. "Oh?"

"A wife ought to be supporting her husband on the triad court, not off on a mission she could've avoided," Apollo replied with a grin. "We've never lost when she's been watching, you know."

She's our good luck charm."

Morgan chuckled. "Could be, but that doesn't explain why my game was so bad today. You're the one she's sealed to, not me. Hey, you've been enjoying connubial bliss long enough. Plan on keeping her?"

"You can bet your life on it!"

"I was afraid of that. Well, if you ever get tired of the wench... But you don't believe in sharing, do you?"

Laughing, the two men headed for the turboshowers.

\* \* \* \* \*

The mission was a simple one. The OSIRIS had managed to capture several relatively intact Cylon Raiders in a skirmish, and Captain Hannibal, a mechanical genius with some knowledge of Cylon machinery, had repaired them. Commander Christopher thought it might be nice if someone aboard his ship knew how to fly them. So Hannibal and Cy, Starbuck's Cylon comrade, had the dubious honour of taking young Warriors out for their maiden flights in unfamiliar fighters.

Since she was out flying a Raider with Cy, Captain Diana of Purple Squadron missed her husband's triad game.

Hannibal was demonstrating to a young Warrior -- too young, he thought -- just how easy it was to "fix" a Raider -- in five centons' time -- so it could be flown by one human, instead of a three-Cylon crew. Both looked up in surprise when word came to clear the landing bay for an incoming ship.

Neither Captain Lala's Viper patrol nor Diana's Raider were due back yet, and Hannibal was only half-way through reconnecting a delicate navigation circuit to the fuel gauges. Nevertheless, he and his student cleared the deck.

It was the Raider. Hannibal decided to investigate its premature return, since he was the one who would have to fix it if Diana had somehow managed to foul up.

Cy clambered out and rapidly clanked to the nearest turbolift. Hannibal waited for the Captain to disembark, mentally checking off a series of questions and possible problems. When she didn't appear, he became concerned. Had she somehow been injured, despite the simple manoeuvres, despite his careful instructions and Cy's tutelage? Had one of the circuit boards shorted out on her? He ran to check.

Microns later, he jumped from the Raider. "Cy! Where in Hades is Captain Diana?" he yelled across the deck. His erstwhile student regarded him in astonishment.

~~"That-is-what-I-must-communicate-with-Commander-Christopher-about. She-was-obeying-a-simple-command-to-execute-a-starboard-bank-when-she-vanished. It-is-highly-irregular-and-from-what-I-understand-impossible-for-humans."~~ The turbolift rose out of Hannibal's sight, taking the Cylon with it.

Hannibal stared after it for only a micron; then instinct took over. "Naradecicli!" he bellowed at his student. "Get a shuttle ready. We may be needing it."

\* \* \* \* \*

Apollo felt better after washing off the sweat from the debacle of a triad game. Both he and Morgan looked better, too.

"Shall we try the pilots' lounge? We might get some sympathy, and Diana should be back soon," the Captain suggested.

His companion nodded. "If we hurry, we might even convince Starbuck to buy us a consolation round. I talked to him for a centon after the game, and that's where he and Alex were headed. Looks like they patched things up again."

"They've surprised me lately. I've never known them to go without speaking to one another for an entire section before. Alexandra never let it be so obvious that she didn't like Starbuck seeing other women, always pretended it didn't bother her. And their little arguments have always blown over in a few centars. I'm glad they've gotten over it — but I'd sure like to know what set it off in the first place. Diana's never too happy when someone from her squadron's sulking — and Alexandra can sulk very well when she wants to."

Morgan didn't answer. He knew what was bothering Alex; it would have been impossible for a telepath not to pick up something like that. But it was none of his business — and probably none of Apollo's, either. Hopefully, Starbuck and Alexandra would work the situation out between them; then, maybe the Sergeant's worries would stop sneaking in past his mental barriers.

As the two men strolled down the corridor, carefree despite their defeat, they noticed someone standing in the passageway ahead of them. The man was of medium height, robed in white, with a regal and somewhat condescending aura about him. There was something menacing in his smile.

The stranger strode toward them, and Morgan had a definite feeling of dread. He was unfamiliar, but the telepath felt sure he'd encountered him before, somewhere...

Apollo gasped, nearly choking as he recognized the stranger; he turned pale and staggered, would have fallen to his knees if Morgan hadn't caught his arm.

"You..."

"Greetings, Apollo. You survived our last meeting, I see. I thought perhaps you would have deciphered my message."

Apollo's voice was a rasping whisper. "No! Not again...!"

The stranger smiled. And Morgan knew, with absolute certainty, that something was terribly wrong, that some great danger threatened, and that this man...no, this being...was responsible...

"I have them, Apollo. Both of them, the ones you love. I'll wait for you a short time, but not long. For their sakes, don't be too slow in following."

Then he was gone, vanishing abruptly. The two Warriors stared at an empty corridor.

Morgan looked searchingly at his friend. Apollo was shaking, his eyes wide and staring. His lips moved soundlessly. The only colour left in his face was in his wild, terror-filled green eyes.

"Who was it, Apollo? Who was it?" he demanded intensely, his hands gripping his friend's trembling shoulders.

But Apollo seemed incapable of speech for the moment, and the telepath had to pull an answer from



the other man's horrified mind. Iblis...

Morgan stiffened. Iblis? Iblis had Diana? Both of them...?

Suddenly, he had the answer. Leaving Apollo leaning helplessly against the cold metal of the corridor wall, he ran for the nearest launch bay.

"Apollo!"

Somehow, from somewhere, Apollo heard that urgent call, and turned to see Starbuck running toward him, with Alexandra, her wingmate Lieutenant Gregory, Gregory's wife Linnea, and Cy trailing after him.

"What...?"

"Apollo, Diana's gone! They were on patrol, and Cy says she just vanished. She was sitting right next to him, and she just disappeared! We thought you should hear from friends... Lords, what's wrong with you? We'll find her, I promise..."

"Diana... Both the ones I love?" If possible, Apollo's face lost even more colour. "Iblis got both of them?" Then, like a man deranged, he shoved past Starbuck and the others, following Morgan toward the launch bay.

"Iblis?" Alexandra frowned. "Starbuck, isn't that the...?"

Starbuck, too, was pale. "Yeah," he replied. "Let's go. We'd better go after him, before something terrible happens."

"Where're we going?" Gregory asked, trotting along behind Starbuck.

The Lieutenant stopped, taking a long look at his friend, and at the young woman so newly a wife. "Not you. You're not going anywhere, Greg. Stay with Linnea." He couldn't ask the other man to go with him, to follow Apollo to Hades. Where Iblis was concerned, there might be no return...

"While you take off after a man who may have just gone crazy?" Gregory demanded. He couldn't help remembering the sectars following Apollo's arrival aboard the OSIRIS. "And don't forget, Diana's my commander, too, and my friend."

"Stay with your wife! Lords, stay with her, stay here, for the sake of everything you hold dear! I won't go alone; I'll take Cy. We'll go after him."

Gregory nodded slowly, in growing comprehension of Starbuck's dread, sensing something of the ominous turmoil his friend was experiencing. He took Linnea's hand, and his wife shivered as she moved closer to him. The young couple was left behind as Starbuck dashed toward the launch bay, Cy and Alexandra still trailing behind him.

The launch bay itself was in chaos. An extremely upset maintenance tech was screaming at Hannibal about idiotic Viper pilots with no brains and even less sense, who stole ships and flew off with them. "And why aren't you doing something about it, since you out-rank all of them?"

The Captain ignored the technician's outrage and grabbed Starbuck's arm as the Lieutenant tried to push through the confusion to reach his Viper. "If you think you're taking that ship and flying out of here without clearance, the way your two friends just did, you're crazier than they are, and you won't get away with it. Lieutenant, I want to know...no, I order you to tell me what's

going on."

The tech was still screaming in his ear. Hannibal was obviously upset. Starbuck could number on the fingers of one hand the times he'd heard the normally soft-spoken Engineer raise his voice. He knew he had to give some sort of answer...

"I'm not sure what's going on, but we have to follow them. You saw how they looked!" he insisted, trying to pull free of the older man's surprisingly strong grasp.

"And what are they so upset about? Yes, Diana's missing, and I understand how that would upset them both, but they aren't going to have much chance of finding her like this, flying off to the Lords alone know where without letting us set up a search pattern."

"A search pattern? And where will you start when a woman simply vanishes?" Starbuck retorted. "I'll tell you what happened to her, and they know it already! She's been kidnapped by something that calls itself 'Count Iblis,' who'll probably kill her if he gets the opportunity! He'll definitely kill Apollo if we don't stop him! What he'll do to Morgan, I don't know, but we've got to get to them first!"

"Get where? And what will you do when you get there?"

"I don't know! Maybe nothing! But we've got to try!"

"Lieutenant, you're not making any sense." Hannibal calmly stared him down, refusing to release his grip, but making no effort to force any additional response.

Starbuck's eyes finally dropped. He was certain his next bunk would be in the brig -- or worse, the mental ward of Life Centre. Who would believe him?

Hannibal spoke again, more gently. "All right, Starbuck, you seem to have some idea what's going on, and what to do about it. But we can't let our pilots go flying off into the Lords only know what craziness like a bunch of green Cadets. I've had a shuttle prepared, expecting we'd need it. Let's get going."

The Lieutenant stared at him in astonishment. "You're coming, too?"

"Why not? I've a bone to pick with whoever or whatever is stealing pilots from ships I've worked so hard to repair."

The idea of anyone facing down the sinister Count Iblis seemed hilariously macabre to Starbuck, and he laughed -- even as he shuddered in horror. "If you insist, but remember, you asked for it. Hey, wait a micron! Alexandra, you're staying here!"

The woman had grabbed a flight pack and was heading for the shuttle. She gave him a level glance. "No."

"But I told you about Iblis... You know what he can do, what he did the last time. I can't let you into this, any more than I'd let Greg..."

"Do you think you can stop me? Apollo is my Flight Commander. Diana is my captain; she and Morgan are my friends. You are...you. I'm going with you."

There was no fear in her brown eyes, only determination, and a quiet stubbornness that told him she'd go along even if she had to steal a Viper and follow them against orders.

Loyalty? Love? Curiosity? There was no way of telling what motivated her, but Starbuck knew the little trouble-maker would follow. He kissed her lightly, and pulled her aboard the shuttle.

At just that moment, they finally heard Commander Christopher's angry voice over the ship's intercom. "Will someone please tell your Commander what in Hades is going on?" he bellowed over the speakers. "This is not a request!"

The shuttle launched.

"Another launch? By the Lords, I'll pull your rank! You'll be Cadets to the day you die!" From the Commander's tone, that might be today. No one found the courage to answer him.

Aboard the shuttle, Starbuck and Alexandra searched their scanners, and located two Vipers ahead of them, the first presumably Morgan's, the second, Apollo's.

"Set course to follow," Hannibal ordered unnecessarily, peering over their shoulders.

Starbuck nodded.

"Starbuck?"

He glanced at Alexandra. "Yeah?"

She regarded him with worried eyes. "You don't really expect to come back alive, do you?" It wasn't really a question.

He looked away, his hands clenched and white on the controls. "I really don't know. I just don't know." His low voice, and the shudder he tried to conceal, proclaimed his lie. "I shouldn't have brought you, Aley. I should have come alone."

Hannibal slapped him hard on the back. "There's something wrong with your attitude, Lieutenant. We'll come through this all right. Of course, I'm not too sure about the others, though; they're strange enough as it is."

His raised eyebrows and innocent expression brought feeble laughter from his human companions.

\* \* \* \* \*

Morgan followed Iblis' trail, sensing the demon's mocking laughter all the way. He knew he was being led into a trap, and he knew Apollo was following. But Iblis had Diana, and one other. There was only one "other" Iblis could have, since Diana was the only missing member of the OSIRIS crew...

She must be pregnant.

Morgan had to reach her. There had to be some way to take her from Iblis and survive, whatever Apollo feared.

There has to be a way...

If he couldn't save her, if Apollo couldn't, Iblis would kill her, or worse. Diana -- and her child.

Apollo, not far behind, had also come to a conclusion about the identity of the other captive. He knew what Iblis was capable of doing. Whatever the cost, he had to save his wife -- and his daughter.

He had no doubts about the child being a girl. He'd known for a long time that their first child would be a daughter. Ila... She couldn't be more than sections from conception...

Whatever Iblis demanded of him, Apollo knew he would surrender. For Diana's sake, for the child, he had no choice. This time, he was deathly afraid Iblis had won, and his own soul would be forfeit. But, whatever the cost, their lives were worth it...

Lords, is there any hope for me, for them...?

Iblis had come after him before -- twice. The first time, he remembered, he had survived. Iblis had killed him, intending to destroy Sheba, but he'd somehow been brought back, physically and emotionally, although the mystery of his own resurrection still awed him.

The second time had been worse -- a death beyond reclamation, Iblis' hands stained with a woman's blood, a woman he'd cared for as just a bit more than a friend, and himself torn from home and duties and family, left to die...

Somehow, Diana had pulled him through, and Morgan had helped him to heal, with time and friendship, love and duty. And now, it was happening again... And this time, it was Diana the demon sought.

Not her, when he'd lost so much, so many times...

He knew he should tell Morgan to turn back while there was still time. There was nothing his friend could do; he had no chance against Iblis. Dear friend...

Apollo checked his scanners. Something strange was happening to Morgan's Viper...

"Damn you, Iblis! Damn you!" he sobbed. It was already too late; Morgan's ship was breaking up. The demon had taken him, too -- another death on the monster's hands -- and on his own conscience. Iblis took them all, and left only the pain...

Morgan, Morgan... Diana, how can I tell you this? How can you bear it? How can I live with it?

He flew his Viper directly through the heart of the expanding cloud that had been Morgan's ship, past fragments of Viper, feeling every shard lancing his heart and mind. Iblis was letting him through, but he hadn't wanted Morgan. It was no longer a question of surviving, he thought. But he had to reach Diana. There had to be some way, for their daughter's sake...

On the other side of the cloud of debris, he spotted a star system. There was one planet in the star's life belt; it might be marginally habitable for humans.

A face appeared among the stars, blocking them for a micron. A voice echoed through the corridors of his mind, chilling all thought. "Yes, Apollo, you're still on the right path." Then Iblis' touch was withdrawn, and he was alone again.

Apollo gritted his teeth in rage and despair. He took his ship down to the planet's surface, somehow landing through a mist of tears. Morgan had led him here, to Iblis, to his own death. Iblis had killed him. Iblis held Diana, if she was still alive.

He held Apollo's soul.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Wreckage," Starbuck muttered, staring through one of the shuttle's view ports. Gleaming metal fragments drifted silently with space dust, expelled from the darkness of the cloud that dissipated even as they approached.

"Morgan's, do you think?" Alexandra asked worriedly.

"Yeah. He'd want Apollo alive, for now, at least, to gloat. Damn him, it's not his right! He's got no right to any of them, not Apollo, not Diana, and not Morgan. He'd have more right to me than any of them. I've always flaunted the rules. Damn him!"

Something in Starbuck's tone passed over Hannibal, but drew Alexandra's attention. Whatever this Iblis was, could he harm Starbuck? Would he want to? What was he? She shuddered.

"There's a star system ahead -- one star, one planet," she announced a moment later, her eyes fixed worriedly on Starbuck's face. Should I tell him...?

"That's where Iblis is, then, and probably Apollo and Diana as well. I wonder why he let us get this far... He's got to know we're here..."

"You were there the other times, Starbuck. Maybe he wants you here for the grand finale -- whatever that is."

His eyes locked with hers. "Let's not disappoint him, then. Captain, do we set down?"

"I don't think I could stop you. Cy, are our weapons fully charged?"

"They won't be any use," Starbuck interrupted before the Cylon could reply. "We've tried before."

"This Iblis might not be the only thing down there that wants us dead."

Starbuck remembered angry, frightened natives on another world half a galaxy away -- natives of Iblis' world, a world that died. He nodded.

\* \* \* \* \*

Apollo never noticed the bright streak across the sky above him as the shuttle carrying his fellow humans entered the planet's atmosphere. He stood before the mouth of an immense cave, gathering his courage for one last effort. Iblis waited within -- Iblis, and death.

"Do come in, Apollo. I am not such a poor host as to leave a guest standing outside my door." Malicious laughter, then, "Besides, there is someone here who is just dying to see you again. You have arrived in time."

Apollo took a final look at the star above him, with all its flaring brilliance; at the sky, an incredible blue with just a hint of the violet Diana loved so well; at the world around him, new and still forming, still without life. He breathed a final prayer to the Lords of Kobol, lingering for a moment on memories of the GALACTICA, of his father, his sister, his lost son, of old friends -- and new ones -- aboard the OSIRIS, of people and places he would never see again.

Then he stepped forward into the darkness.



*W. H. F.*

The cave was opulent, gleaming in a light that seemed to come from nowhere, and everywhere. The interior was luxurious, decorated with all the skill the finest designers of the Colonies could have offered. Across the huge, stone-walled chamber, the floor was covered with thick shaggy carpets cut from a fur belonging to a beast Apollo had never encountered before; from their shape and thickness, he hoped he never would. The wall hangings were woven from more of the same, tapestries dyed in wildly exotic colours and patterns that somehow harmonized with the rest of the room.

Iblis himself sat on a carved, massively ornate throne midway down the length of the vast hall. He was dressed, as always, in quietly-coloured, rich robes, like the civilized king of some barbaric people. He held a clear crystal chalice in one hand, and leisurely sipped its golden-brown contents.

Chained, a collar at her throat, Diana knelt beside Iblis' throne. Her jacket and laser were gone; her uniform was torn. Her fiery hair formed a tangled halo around her face.

Once, Iblis had used sweet words to try to seduce Sheba; he had very nearly succeeded. But with this woman, he had obviously tried a different ploy.

Nothing could have galled Apollo more. "Damn you!" he cried through clenched teeth.

"Ah, my little pet... Do you like her?" The demon ran his fingers through the red mane of hair, a gentle touch that pulled through the snarls. His eyes dared the human to challenge him.

Apollo nearly drew his laser before he remembered it would do no good.

"If you behave well," Iblis continued conversationally, "I might even let you see her now and then. And now, if you look to your left, you will see another recent acquisition."

Filled with dread, Apollo turned as a tapestry parted, as if drawn back by invisible hands, to reveal a golden-barred cage. Morgan knelt within, a collar around his neck, cold metal links chaining him to the wall of his prison even as Diana was bound to the throne. He was alive, but...

Apollo whirled on Iblis, drawing his weapon, this time heedless of what the demon might do.

Iblis merely smiled slightly. But Diana screamed, and Morgan stifled a moan.

"Don't, Apollo. I tried...when he brought me here. He'll hurt Diana -- and you can't hurt him."

Shaking with impotent rage, Apollo threw the laser from him, and it fell with a clatter against the far wall of the cave.

Iblis smiled congenially, continuing to stroke Diana's hair as one might stroke the fur of a pet beast. "Well, Apollo, it seems you do have some sense after all. I was beginning to wonder about you. Won't you have something to drink?" He glanced at the chained telepath; the golden cage vanished. "Serve your master's guest, slave -- now!"

A small flare of light flew from his hand toward the still-chained Morgan, who cried out once, then clenched his teeth, refusing to make any further outcry. What Iblis could do to a telepath was perhaps worse than what he could do to the others; a telepath could be forced to witness the motives and evil of the demon's actions.

A tray bearing a silvery chalice materialized on the floor beside Morgan. He picked it up and



started to get to his feet, then sank back to the shaggy carpet, gasping in agony.

"Stop it, Iblis!" Apollo shouted. "Stop these damnable pretenses!"

"Show more respect for your master, slave. Serve from your knees, as befits your position." The suave voice never lost the slightest nuance of charm and culture. "I do hope you like it, Apollo. It will not be so bitter, once you have downed the first swallow."

Morgan crawled to Apollo's side, the chain dragging behind him, and offered him the drink.

#### Poison, from the hand of a friend?

Apollo could see the strain of some great inner struggle on his friend's features, mirrored in green eyes so like his own. This cannot be allowed to go on...

"What do you want, Iblis?" he demanded. "What do you want from me? Just stop this. Let them go. I'm here -- I came to you as you wanted. And I'll stay, I'll do whatever you want -- but let them go!"

"Let them go? Whatever for?" The tone was that of an indulgent father responding in puzzlement to the foolish question of a small child. "After all, they are the surest guarantee of your obedience. And they are so amusing in their own right."

It can't go on! Apollo's voice was harsh. "I'm here. You've won. I'll stay, but you have to let them go. I give you my word..."

Iblis laughed, a victorious, mocking laughter that chilled the three Warriors to the very depths of their souls. "I've found your price at last, Apollo. You can't know how long I have waited and planned for this. There is little time left for you before you die, but I will enjoy it to its fullest. And after death, you will still be mine. Mine -- forever!" He stroked Diana's hair again, negligently, as though the action were completely natural and without conscious thought, and she cringed away from him. He absently pulled her chain close, and slapped her.

Murder glared in Apollo's eyes. His hands twitched as though aching to be around his enemy's throat.

The demon noticed the convulsive movement. "Ah, do be careful, Apollo. These females can be so fragile..." He smiled again. Nothing could anger him now, as he savoured his vengeance. This was a victory he had desired for yahrens, ever since his first encounter with this particular human, who had dared to thwart him when he sought the GALACTICA and her Fleet.

Now, the human was his prisoner, his possession, soon to be broken -- a malleable pawn to be utterly destroyed at his leisure.

"Actually, Apollo," he mused, "it's amazing that you have managed to avoid me for so long. I usually get what I want much more quickly. But you -- you have been different. You, and Starbuck -- and that accursed Sheba..."

"What about Sheba?" Apollo demanded, unable to completely keep the fear from his voice. Sheba had been freed, long ago! He knew it; he'd paid the price for her freedom with his life. She was free -- wasn't she? Or did this monster's touch corrupt forever?

"Nothing important. I made her a promise once, one I intend to keep today."

"She's beyond your reach!" Apollo insisted, trying desperately to convince himself.

"Perhaps, but she will still mourn your passing, and your damnation to my service. I have waited for this a long time, Apollo, and the time is finally here. You are mine."

Apollo closed his eyes, knowing a moment's relief that at least one friend wouldn't die because of Iblis' vengeance on his own head. But the others... "You have me. Let Diana and Morgan go," he pleaded. "Be satisfied with my death..."

"Are you truly foolish enough to think I would ever let them go? Or the others? They are here now, you know. You realize, of course, that Starbuck followed you. Yes, he'd follow you even here, to me. He and several companions are even now approaching my humble abode."

"Lords, no!" Apollo cried in anguish, his face draining of colour.

A shadow crossed Morgan's face. He still knelt at Apollo's feet; the tray, forgotten, lay on the carpet.

"I might, of course, have destroyed them as they approached, even as they believe me to have killed Morgan, for this is my world. But I think you might like to see Starbuck one last time. It will be the last, unless he joins you in my service -- which he might well do before this day is done."

"Never!"

"For your sake, he might. He has such misguided loyalties. He might want to ease your death, perhaps, or try to spare his woman. She came, too, you see, and she is in the same condition as your precious Diana. She followed for friendship's sake, and for Starbuck. Nearly as misguided as he is, that female, and just as stupid."

Apollo almost expected to see them both materialize in chains, knowing he would have to watch them suffer before Iblis brought about his death -- and likely, theirs as well.

"The same as your Diana," Iblis repeated. "Both of them. And Starbuck does not know yet. Those two may provide diversion for quite some time."

He's playing with me. Why? Looking for something? But what? My breaking point, maybe? He's already found my price -- Diana, Morgan, the child...

And Starbuck will be forced to undergo the same torture, if he feels anything real and deep for Alexandra, or for his friends. Iblis will make them all suffer...

"What do you want from me?" he asked wearily.

"No!" Diana exclaimed. "Apollo, don't! You can't trust him; he'll never let us go! Not even you know him as I've seen him, or know what he's made me see! Please, don't..."

"Shut up, bitch!" Iblis backhanded her, hard, and she sprawled on the carpet. "I suggest you consider your words more carefully, woman, or I may be forced to discipline you more severely. You would do well to learn from your lover how to be respectful toward your master."

Face-down on the gaudy carpet, Diana began to cry. She'd been brave, clinging to hope, refusing to accept the future Iblis was so willing to show her; but now, it was more than she could bear. Her husband, her dearest friend... Others, too, whom she also called friend, and whoever else had

accompanied Starbuck and Alexandra... "Apollo, please, don't listen to..."

Enraged, he didn't hear her, but leapt for his enemy's throat. Iblis easily threw him back.

Sprawled on the carpet alongside Morgan, Apollo glared at the demon, unable to do anything more. The telepath took his arm, helping him to his knees.

"You look angry, slave," Iblis said, his words directed at Morgan. "You should not show such sentiments toward your master, certainly not in the presence of honoured guests."

The chain attached to the collar around the man's neck began to retract into the wall as the demon gestured toward it. It dragged Morgan back with it. The Warrior fought both chain and collar, but lost. He finally gave in, ceasing his struggles, all but strangled.

Apollo forced himself to his feet and stood unsteadily, unsure what to do next. He knew there was little chance of anything helping him now.

"Oh, don't bother rising, Apollo. In fact, I would much rather you didn't. You belong on your knees before me." The urbane voice held a subtle menace.

Iblis would destroy both Diana and Morgan, and Apollo knew it. Starbuck, following blindly, was also doomed, as were Alexandra and anyone else with him.

Whatever I do, they won't survive... He slumped in despair, falling to his knees again and closing his eyes. What can I do?

There was only one thing that might be salvaged; if Iblis would only permit the OSIRIS to depart in peace... But that was unlikely; he knew the demon's nature far too well. His vengeance would extend to his unfortunate shipmates...

But Apollo had nothing to bargain with. What could he offer, when Iblis held Diana in chains before him? And what could Iblis be trusted with? Did he even know the meaning of honour, this Prince of Darkness and Evil?

Diana was chained, and Morgan; Starbuck and Alexandra would soon join them. His own chains were invisible.

"What next?" he murmured to his vanquisher. "What chains do you have for me?"

In response, Iblis drew something from beneath his robes, throwing it to the floor in front of his captive. A knife lay there, wickedly long and sharp, glowing with an evil inner light, forged in hell-fire to claim a soul. He smiled at Apollo's shudder of revulsion.

"Once, I could not take your life because it was not mine to claim, although I tried. Now, your life is mine to take, and I dearly want it. But I will not kill you. I claim your life, Apollo — but by your own hand. With that, you may buy a more merciful end for your wife and child and friends." He settled back on his throne, waiting, watching.

The Warrior stared at him, his face waxen. Then something seemed to snap inside him; his inner struggle was over, the battle lost. Slowly, he reached for the blade.

Diana raised her head, reaching for him with one hand...

"No!" Morgan whispered hoarsely, as he struggled to hold back the horror...

Apollo held the knife. With one hand, he pulled his uniform open to the waist. He sighed, and glanced at Diana, then Morgan, and back at Diana.

"Defy him, Apollo! For God's sake, defy him! I can bear death, with you! Please!"

Apollo's empty eyes stared at Iblis as if he hadn't heard Diana's plea.

The Dark Prince smiled, took a sip from his chalice, and nodded at the broken Warrior. "Go ahead, Apollo, but please do be careful where you stab. I have things to tell you afterward, and you must live long enough to hear them. And do not be concerned for the mess; I don't mind the idea of your blood upon the carpet."

"I never thought to die like this..."

"Apollo!" Diana's shaky voice betrayed her agony, her fear. "Why should I live if you die? What is there for me, if you let him take your life like this?"

"May I kiss her good-bye?" His lifeless eyes rested momentarily on the woman he loved.

"I think not."

Apollo nodded mutely, and raised the knife.

"You should consider carefully, Diana. This may be a valuable weapon for you, as well. I may give you a chance to use it when he is through, if you want to remain with him so badly. No doubt it will be stained and bloody, but in such a state, it will be a treasured keepsake. And I am sure he won't mind sharing it with you. Would you like that, my dear?"

He took another sip from his chalice, gloating as he regarded the man's emotional lifelessness, soon to be true death. "Go ahead, Apollo. You are keeping your audience waiting."

Apollo set the point of the blade against his skin. It would pierce a vital spot, but wouldn't be instantly fatal. He took another long look at Diana, then lowered his eyes.

"No!" The cry came, not from the despair of Diana and Morgan, but from a horrified Starbuck, who stood in the arched entrance of the cave, watching in disbelief.

His friend didn't seem to hear. His fascinated gaze was locked on the weapon in his hand. He ran one finger along the shining edge, testing its sharpness; blood welled where the blade had cut, dark against the metal.

Starbuck threw himself at Apollo, forcing the knife away from his friend's body, leaving only a scratch where the point had touched his skin.

Apollo struggled, grappling with Starbuck, while Iblis laughed. It had been well worth the time to ensnare those two. A pity the pleasure could not be drawn out indefinitely, throughout all eternity...

Somehow, Apollo managed to break free from Starbuck, still holding the knife. He raised it again, striking at one of his closest friends, apparently not recognizing him; there was madness in his eyes.





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Starbuck grabbed for him again, avoiding the thrust. Diana and Morgan watched, praying, even if a moment's respite was all they could hope to gain. Alexandra and Hannibal stood in the archway, staring at the totally unexpected scene.

Iblis noticed them. "Do come in. I believe you know everyone here. I hope you enjoy the entertainment." He gestured, and two chairs, smaller versions of his throne, appeared at his mental command. His reluctant guests slowly entered the cave.

Suddenly, Starbuck had possession of the weapon. He threw it at the demon, who deflected it with a nonchalant wave. It fell to the ground, nearly striking Diana. She didn't even flinch; but Apollo screamed, and nearly collapsed.

Starbuck was panting as he grabbed his friend's arms, trying to force him to look away from Diana and Iblis, to look at him.

The dark-haired Warrior continued to stare at the knife. "You could have killed her," he said, his voice more dull and colourless than Starbuck had ever heard it before.

"And you would have killed yourself!"

Apollo shrugged. "Not right away. I don't matter..."

Morgan suddenly screamed. Diana grabbed the knife, and stabbed at Iblis' leg. The demon snarled as the metal cut him, then kicked at the woman. Blood stained her lips, but she stabbed at him again, defiant once more. This time, Iblis pulled the weapon from her hand.

But the distracting ploy succeeded. "Starbuck! Iblis has his mind! Help him!" Morgan shouted. "Apollo! Think what he's doing to you! Think!"

The chain yanked tight; choking, Morgan's voice died away in a strangled gasp.

"You begin to annoy me, telepath!" Iblis spat.

For just a micron, Starbuck thought he saw a glint of reason in Apollo's eyes; then it died. Holding the other man in an arm lock, he scanned the room desperately.

The demon stood before his throne, majestically enraged, exuding vicious malevolence. Diana lay face-down on the carpet, not even daring to hope any longer. Morgan struggled for breath against the choking collar. Alexandra and Hannibal still stood just inside the archway, staring wide-eyed.

Then Cy lumbered into the cave.

"The-ship-is-secure."

Apollo pulled free of Starbuck's grasp, his eyes rivetted to the knife Iblis had dropped to the carpet. On his knees, he began to crawl toward it.

"Hannibal! Cy! Help me!" Starbuck launched himself at Apollo in a flying tackle.

The demon found the sight highly amusing; he chuckled.

Hannibal disentangled the two men, pulling Apollo to his feet, and Cy clanked forward to seize the man in a grip such as only a Cylon could hold. The Captain struggled futilely in the metal



embrace.

"Thanks, buddy," Starbuck panted to Morgan. "Diana, are you all right?"

She nodded, and Starbuck glared at Iblis, his features grim. Iblis' smile almost shook his resolve, but he had a good idea of what he had to do. There didn't seem to be any other way, short of outright surrender -- which would mean death for all of them.

"Iblis, whatever it takes, even if I have to kill him myself, you're not getting Apollo that way."

The demon laughed again, genuinely amused by the man's presumptuousness. "Ah, Starbuck, Starbuck, you do entertain me with your posturings. Do you propose to stop me?"

The blond warrior's resolve strengthened. Diana had risked her life, and Morgan likely his sanity, to warn him of what Iblis was doing to Apollo's mind; he wasn't about to let that knowledge be wasted. He wasn't going to allow Apollo to commit suicide for a demon's amusement.

He's not murdering Apollo that way. If he wants him dead, he's going to have to do his own dirty work. If he kills Apollo, he's going to have to take full responsibility for it before whatever Forces he answers to...

Iblis may have been reading his mind, for he frowned, then turned his attention back to Apollo. "An intriguing idea occurs to me, Apollo. There is a price that will buy Diana's life."

Apollo stopped struggling against Cy's hold. "What is it?" he demanded.

"Starbuck's death. Kill him, and your lady will live."

The six humans stood frozen in a silent tableau that might have lasted eternally.

Diana broke it. "Live how?" she screamed. "As your slave? Your plaything? I'd rather die! Apollo, do you hear me? I'd rather die! He's lying; don't listen to him! I won't let you; I won't live with it! Do you hear me? I won't live with it!"

The demon's smile widened, and the room suddenly seemed darker, more menacing. A flicker of something crossed the chamber, chilling them all. Cy stiffened. Then the knife, imbedded in the shag of the rug, flew free, skittering across the floor and landing at Apollo's feet. He stared down at it.

Then, for the first time in Cylon existence, a human broke from a Cylon's grip. Apollo was free. He bent slowly, and picked up the weapon, his eyes fastened on Starbuck. He straightened, trembling.

"Apollo?" Starbuck asked uneasily. The only reaction was a flicker in his friend's eyes. The Lieutenant took a step closer, raising his hands entreatingly. "Please, say something. Apollo?"

"I'm...fine. It's all right, Starbuck. You know me. Everything's fine."

Carefully, deliberately, Morgan reached into Apollo's mind, violating his own cardinal rule for the second time that day. Was that actually a trace of sanity he was presenting to Starbuck? Or was it some game of the demon's, to make the victim less wary?

Apollo took a step, the knife hanging loosely in his hand. He smiled shakily.

"Apollo...?"

"No!" Morgan shouted in warning. "Starbuck, look out...!"

Apollo snarled, and threw himself at Starbuck, the blade flashing upward in a wide arc. With the telepath's warning, the intended victim managed to leap back, barely in time; the stroke missed by fractions of an inch. The two men went down on the floor, Apollo stabbing wildly, Starbuck struggling for his life against a madman.

The fight lasted barely thirty microns, but it seemed forever to the horrified on-lookers. Then Hannibal waded into the battle, catching Apollo's knife hand and jerking the weapon away. Apollo took one swing at the older man before the engineer threw him to the floor.

He scrambled back to his feet, his attention once more on Starbuck, ready to kill him with his bare hands if he had to.

Hannibal drew his laser in a blur of motion; the weapon, set to stun, fired, and Apollo fell to the floor.

The engineer knelt beside him, while Alexandra helped Starbuck back to his feet. Blood stained his right sleeve; there was more on his jaw. He glanced worriedly at the grey-haired man.

"We've got him, Starbuck," Hannibal said. Then he nodded at Morgan. "Timely warning, that. Thanks."

The telepath tried to smile, but failed; he was still shaking from the aura of horror and death that permeated the chamber.

Starbuck turned back to Iblis. "You want Apollo dead. I don't," he said flatly. "You seem to think I'd make nearly as good a victim as he would. I think we can make a deal."

"You can't deal with him!" Diana exclaimed.

Alexandra caught her breath in shock, staring at Starbuck, wondering if he, too, had lost his mind, as Apollo obviously had.

The demon's eyebrows lifted. He considered for a moment, leaning forward, then settled back in his seat once more. "I may be interested. Continue."

Diana shuddered. Morgan tried to reach Starbuck, and she felt the intensity of his silent plea. Starbuck disregarded the attempt, his attention completely focussed on Iblis, and on what he was about to say. He shook off Alexandra, who clutched at his wounded arm.

"I offer you my life in exchange for Apollo's. Here, and now. Take my life; end it -- or you risk losing us all. You know you can't hold us."

"I already have you."

Starbuck forced a laugh, as cold and calculating as he could make it. "Your choice, Iblis. My death, now, willingly, or the penalty you'll have to pay for taking Apollo's life. You know damned well there's no way in Hades or the Beyond that you can claim his life anywhere, in any way, without punishment -- even if he kills himself at your command. He's not yours. With you holding the knife and stealing his will, you have no claim to him."

Something akin to a flush briefly coloured the demon's face. Was he becoming annoyed? Starbuck mentally crossed his fingers.

"I have all the time I need, and a price he cannot resist." The voice was low, intense, and deadly. Iblis caught a handful of thick red hair, yanking Diana to her knees. She was silent. "And you, Lieutenant, are rapidly losing any value to me."

The blond Warrior managed another laugh, and tried to keep his knees from shaking. "I no longer amuse you? Then consider my offer. You can end my useless existence at any time. My death for Apollo's — now. You have no claim to him, and you never will." Smiling, he raised his arms, standing open, vulnerable, inviting whatever attack Iblis cared to launch.

Diana stifled a sob. Hannibal, still bent over Apollo, tensed.

"Wait a micron. Starbuck..." Alexandra took an anxious step forward, catching his arm again. What in Sagan's name was the man doing? There was no bargaining with this creature; he'd said so himself...

"Well?" Starbuck demanded, pushing her away again. "I'm ready. Are you? Now -- or face the consequences."

Iblis' face twisted into a ghastly, flaming mask of snarling rage, fanged like some terrible beast. The hand clenched around the chalice became a claw; the goblet shattered, spilling amber liquid and sparkling shards over Diana.

"You will regret taunting me, Starbuck..."

"Oh, will I?" he asked, as lightly as he could.

"Starbuck!" This time, Alexandra couldn't be shaken off. "What in Hades...? Iblis, you can't..." One look told her he could, and would. Suddenly afraid, she stepped between man and demon. "You don't understand..."

But it was she who didn't understand -- didn't understand the depth of the demon's evil and hate.

"Oh, I understand, child," he replied, his voice dangerously low, almost bestial. "And you will, too, when your turn comes, and I am through with you."

Her fear grew, tightening into a knot in her stomach. Starbuck took her arms, and drew her out of the way until the matter was settled, one way or another.

"No! Starbuck, you don't understand..." There were tears in her eyes as she tried to gain his attention. Her arms would be bruised in a few centons. "Will you please listen to me for just a micron?"

Morgan, still on his knees beside the wall, knew what she was thinking, what she planned to tell Starbuck. And he was aware that Iblis knew as well. He'd keep her alive long enough to tell Starbuck, then he would claim his first victim...

There wasn't much he could do, but he did what he could, striking at her mind, her thoughts. Whatever it was that Starbuck was planning, he had to be free to try; it might be their only chance. If Alexandra told him, it might destroy his resolve -- and their last hope with it.

Alexandra staggered.

The telepath covered his face with his hands. He didn't need to see what was happening, not with his eyes. He could see the thoughts, the emotions... He couldn't block them; Iblis wouldn't let him. He had to think, to feel, to experience everything that took place. But he didn't have to watch...

Starbuck took one last look at Alexandra's bewildered, dazed face, at the tears in her eyes. He didn't trust himself to kiss her, although it would have been pleasant to die with the memory of her kiss on his lips. In utter silence, he turned her over to Hannibal, who drew her aside and eased her down to the carpet at Apollo's side. Apollo barely stirred.

"Well?" Starbuck said harshly, facing Iblis once again.

The Prince of Darkness watched in satisfaction. He would begin with Starbuck -- the fool! -- then move on to the others. Sooner or later, Apollo would truly break.

Then, he would die -- and at his own hand.

The thought was something the demon had cherished since their first meeting. But first, there were other pleasantries to attend to...

"Apollo!" He wouldn't want his defeated foe to miss so major an event... Apollo must witness the death of his friend; it would be so much more satisfying...

The fallen Warrior stirred, rousing, and dragged himself to his feet, shunning Hannibal's offer of support. "I'm all right now," he said bitterly, glaring at Iblis.

The demon smiled, gazing around the chamber at the tense, strained faces watching him. Then he glanced at Starbuck.

"Your life, you say," he repeated casually. "Very well, I accept your offer."

Flame leapt from his hand, angry blue fire that struck the Warrior squarely. He fell to the floor without a sound, and lay twisted on the carpet, not more than two yards from Diana.

Absolute silence reigned for a full centon, as four human faces mirrored one another's shock and disbelief.

Morgan, still kneeling by the wall with his face hidden, sobbed once. He had felt Starbuck die. The pain had been searing for a fraction of a micron, then it was gone, before Starbuck could even react to the agony.

But there had been something else, something barely sensed. What vague, half-formed thought had dared to swirl through Starbuck's mind in that last moment...?

Suddenly, Alexandra screamed, throwing herself to her feet and forward a single step before collapsing, unconscious.

Apollo's shock gave way to something else. There was no sanity in his eyes, only madness, and a desperate need to prove his friend wasn't dead. Rage, madness, fear, despair -- all lent him strength as he threw himself at Iblis, screaming curses, moving with the instincts of a pained and stricken animal.

Iblis threw him back with a negligent wave, watching him fall to the floor, much as a ravening



beast would watch helpless prey. He smiled, a greedy smile.

In tears, Apollo crawled to his friend's side. "Starbuck?" he whispered. But there was no answer, no pulse, no sign of life.

"He's dead, Apollo. Don't torture yourself," Morgan said softly. "There's nothing we can do for him..."

"Starbuck...how could this happen...?"

Iblis watched in malevolent satisfaction for a moment before rising from his throne. He took the chain holding Diana in his hand and stepped forward, pulling her with him. "If you recall, Apollo, another said she would rather die," he remarked. "It is time for Diana..."

One hopeless, despairing cry, and Apollo collapsed over Starbuck's body, so still he might be dead himself.

Iblis' frown was one of pure pleasure, not anger. "A pity, Apollo," he gloated. "I had hoped you would prove just a little stronger, strong enough to finish this to my satisfaction..."

"Let her go. You've got Apollo. He'll never recover from this; you know that. Let Diana go." The voice was Morgan's. He rose shakily from the corner, his eyes averted from the scene burnt into his memory by Diana's horror, Hannibal's growing anger, Alexandra's grief, the curious viewpoint of a motionless Cylon...

He was drowning helplessly in their emotions, on the verge of shattering. The demon was destroying him in the cruelest possible manner.

"Let her go?" Iblis asked mildly. "Whatever for?"

"Haven't you had your revenge? Sheba's dead. Starbuck's dead. Even if he's still sane, Apollo won't want to survive this. Let her go. She was his price, but you've got what you wanted, done what you wanted. She's of no use to you now..."

"Ah, but she is, Morgan, she is. So are you, and these others. You will all join Apollo and Starbuck. I wouldn't dream of separating the lot of you. You belong together.

"In fact, when I am finished here, I think I may travel elsewhere, perhaps to follow a battlestar. Yes, the OSIRIS... I couldn't separate you..."

It was finally too much to bear. Morgan slumped against the wall, sobbing quietly.

Hannibal found his voice at last, after too many centons of shocked silence. "Who in Hades do you really think you are? What in the name of all that's holy gives you the right to do what you've just done?"

Iblis cocked an eyebrow at him, studying him as if he were some insignificant, vaguely repugnant insect. "You," he said clearly. "I do not think I find you amusing. But we will have to see. You may change your views when you watch the others die. I think I shall keep you until the last. You will see then, when Apollo finally dies, just what I can do. They will all be mine, and their shades may lead you into my service as well."

Hannibal's expression didn't alter in the slightest. By any interpretation, his coldly naked anger meant murder.

A soft cry from Alexandra betrayed her return to consciousness. She saw Apollo and assumed the worst, that he was dead. Her lover dead, the Flight Commander dead, her Captain still in chains, Morgan in tears... Only Hannibal stood to face the demon.

And that, she knew, could only be for microns longer, until Iblis tired of it.

A soft whirring sound drew her attention briefly to Cy. The metal creature stood immobile, with only a sort of mechanical moaning, a Cylon's keening for the dead, to accompany the slow movement of his single red "eye" from side to side. She resented the fact that the machine could express such sorrow.

"Iblis," she hissed, staring at the man-like form still sneering at Hannibal. Rage grew within her, a furious demand for vengeance. But there was nothing she could do, and the emotion sought for but could find no outlet. It turned to feed upon itself; rage became despair.

There was no outlet but tears. She crept to Starbuck's side, tears streaming down her face, blinding her. Very gently, she moved Apollo's outflung arm, rolling him away from the man she loved. She touched Starbuck's hair, kissed his mouth and eyelids for perhaps the last time.

Diana could only watch yearningly, wishing she could cradle Apollo so, marvelling that the demon permitted such a kindness. She knew what Alexandra must be feeling; she felt it, too, along with the lurking horror that Iblis still intended Apollo to take his own life.

"Oh, Starbuck," Alexandra whispered, "Starbuck, I never told you, and now, it's too late. You'll never know... I'll raise our child, Starbuck, I promise. If there's any way in this world or the next... You never knew..." She bowed her head and, burying her face against his chest, gave way to her grief.

Iblis' attention was on Hannibal; he dropped Diana's chain. She crawled to Apollo's side and took him in her arms, clinging to him. "At least we're together," she murmured, stroking his dark hair. "It won't be so bad, now. We can face this, as long as we're together..." Her flame-red hair tangled with his.

Hannibal steeled himself. "You really think you can lord it over us, as if we were nothing, then sweep us out of existence at your whim? You don't know what you face. Whatever you once were, whatever your kind has evolved into, you still don't truly know what you face when you oppose humanity."

"Humanity?" The demon looked stung. "You're no better than any other race I've encountered, and worse than some. I can take you, and I will treat you as I wish because you are nothing!"

"And yet," the engineer replied challengingly, "this one man was so important to you that you spent yahrens pursuing him across the galaxy, so important that you won't stop until he and every one of the people he cares for and values are dead -- no, not merely dead, but destroyed. What do you fear from him?"

"I fear nothing. And I do as I wish."

"You don't know what you wish!" Hannibal roared.

Iblis' face contorted in rage, and he raised his hand to strike. That this damnable human dared question him, dared tell him he was nothing... By his words, the man had sealed his own fate -- as if there ever might have been any different outcome.

"No... No more..." Morgan whispered, shaking his head. His voice was too soft to be heard.

Diana looked away, not wanting to see another man destroyed.

Alexandra, still bent over Starbuck, never heard, never cared.

"He does see something in you that you've ignored, Iblis." The thoughtful voice came from a figure standing behind the throne, a young man with blond hair, laughing blue eyes, and open features; his smile held a kind of peace the demon could never obtain. He wore a Colonial uniform, but white, not the regulation beige or blue; its sheen made the demon's robes seem dirty and dull. "Why do you find it so important to destroy so insignificant a member of so insignificant a species?"

Iblis stared in shock; when he finally spoke, his voice shook. "Starbuck! Like Sheba, you return to mock me. But you will not have the opportunity. You gave yourself to me, surrendered to my will. On your knees, slave! Discard that disgusting reminder of the others. Soon, you will tutor them in their proper activities."

Something distant entered the white-clad warrior's smile. "You have no claim to me."

"What game is this? You offered yourself to me. I took your life, at your own insistence. You gave me my claim -- you gave me your life!"

"Wrong. I offered you the right to end my life, that's all. You should have looked deeper. Beyond that end, beyond your killing me, I am still myself. You know the Book of the Word; your people gave it to us. Now, you go too far; you transgress your own laws, trying to take what is not yours to take. Are you prepared for your punishment?"

The demon stepped back, shaking with rage -- but was there also some fear present in him? "You can't touch me, Starbuck. I know what you are. Deceitful, a liar... We are soul-mates; you could be my disciple..."

"I reject you, Iblis. You have no power over me; you never have had, and you never shall. You defy your own laws."

"You can interfere, human, as far as is ordained. But remember, you have no power over me. You cannot touch me in any way."

"I'll never let your touch corrupt them -- not Apollo, not Diana, or Morgan, or Alexandra, or our children. So it is ordained. Guarding my friends won't be such a terrible task. You may as well leave them, and forget your schemes. Fly, while you still can. Or do you imagine what you have done here has gone unnoticed?"

"I will find a way, Starbuck! You have no power on this plane. You are dead!"

"Leave, while you can."

"He cannot!"

With those words, glowing majesty flooded the cave. Two figures appeared at the entrance, amidst the sun-bright radiance. Then the light gradually dimmed to where human eyes could see a man and a woman standing side by side.



"Angela!" Starbuck exclaimed, his eyes wide with wonder. "And John!"

"Yes, Starbuck." The radiant, peaceful beauty that was Angela stepped forward, and he could see that what had lived for a time with him on a barren planet was but a shadow of what the being truly was.

"Iblis," she said clearly, "you have transgressed yet again, beyond the bounds set for our kind. We came when we knew what you had planned. You will find it bitter, but you must pay."

"No!" he raged. "You will not cage me again! You..."

He vanished, his final words fading in a wall of fury, hate, and despair.

"He is contained," John said sadly. "He will not be happy, and it will neither help nor change him -- but we cannot permit him his freedom. He has misused his power, and must be imprisoned until such time as is decreed."

"Can you hold him?" Starbuck asked. "You didn't before."

"We will hold him for as long as is ordained. He cannot run forever."

Starbuck nodded. "But see what he has done while running? Apollo isn't safe when he is free, or even while he exists."

Angela spoke again. "We do not judge men, or our own kind, by your standards, Starbuck. You know that. We do what we must, in our own way -- or we violate our own laws, and the decrees of the Power Above, and become no better than he, only another form of his evil."

The man nodded. "I understand," he said, meeting her glowing eyes. "You didn't judge me, either, did you?"

"What do you expect now?" John asked. "You gambled on us. You won what you hoped, and your friends are safe. Iblis was too eager, after so long, to defeat you, and he took what seemed an easy victory. But what do you expect, now that we are here?"

Starbuck looked down at his body, still cradled in Alexandra's arms. She didn't seem to have noticed his presence; nor had Diana. He glanced at Morgan; the chain was gone, but the telepath lay sprawled on the floor like a man exhausted.

"I can't return to them?"

"No. You freely gave him the right to end your life. When he struck Apollo down, there was no permission given, and Apollo fought death. We could restore a spirit so stolen, but not one given. Apollo has taught you much."

"Then what is my fate?" Even now, after death, the thought of what lay beyond filled him with trepidation. To have to face that Power Above, to whom even these beings were subject...

Angela smiled. "You need not fear. You have faced your trials, and your final judgement, and have not been found wanting. You didn't hold back your life this time, either, but offered it freely, whatever the consequences, even risking horrible condemnation. You deserve your freedom."

"But you offered your death to Iblis, and he took it. You owe a debt to this world, and to an existence here. You must pay that debt, before you can join us, and those other friends who await

you."

"Others?"

"Your parents, Sheba, Serina, a hundred others. You chose your friends well, Starbuck, and they will be waiting to greet you when you finally join us. But for now, you must pay your debt to this world."

"But Iblis said I had no power..." he objected.

"How is power defined? Pay your debt; it is within your ability."

A thought struck him. "Sheba. What debt did she have to pay, that she stayed?"

Angela's warm gaze reassured his soul. "There was no debt. She was given the choice to return. Once before, another died for her, took Iblis' death blow. She wished to repay that, in a gift of love. She did so, and saved her father; and Iblis hated her all the more. She's waiting, now, for you, and for her father and Apollo — although it will be many yahrens before they join us."

He bowed his head in acceptance of his fate. "So what must I do?"

"That is your choice, as it has always been. Be responsible. Remember what you have won here today, and guard them well."

Angela and John faded, and Starbuck felt himself becoming translucent, vanishing; but he knew he was still there. He listened to the quiet sobs as he gazed around the vast chamber, now empty and dark; Iblis' garish trappings had disappeared with the entity himself.

Alexandra mourned his death. Diana feared for Apollo's life. Morgan lay motionless, his mind cringing from the demon's cruelty, certain only of insanity and death; to him, the former might be more devastating.

Only Hannibal was on his feet, looking about as if he'd just awakened from some troubling dream. He was still poised to continue his confrontation — but he was no longer quite certain what the issue was. He could deal with it, though; he was used to dangerous situations.

Blinking, the engineer shook himself. He decided at once that it would be best to let Diana and Alexandra have a few moments to themselves, and strode over to help a barely conscious Morgan to his feet. Iblis was gone. Where, how, and why weren't important at the moment; all that mattered was that he was gone. Hannibal felt competent to pick up the pieces.

"Cy! Snap out of it! Damn it, you're not supposed to have emotions! Come on, I need your help!"

Free to move again now that the demon that had immobilized him was gone, the Cylon clanked forward to gather Starbuck's body into his metal arms. Alexandra protested at first, but didn't have the strength to carry him herself. She followed Cy to the shuttle, leaning on his friendly metal body for support.

Morgan collapsed completely. Hannibal slung him over his shoulder and carried him to the ship. When he returned, Apollo was stirring; between them, he and Diana got the dazed Warrior to the shuttle, where he collapsed again, succumbing to his dark memories.

Cy flew the small craft from Iblis' world. At least, the Cylon was conscious, and aware of his surroundings — more than could be said for most of the humans aboard. Cy could turn off his

feelings, if he had any. The humans couldn't.

Somehow, they got back to the OSIRIS.

As they entered the landing bay, an irate Commander Christopher demanded a full report from his wayward crewmembers. Then he saw Starbuck's body, and the condition of the others.

He ordered them all to Life Centre. The report could wait.

\* \* \* \* \*

Apollo didn't want to face waking up. He welcomed the occasional sharp stabs in the darkness that kept his mind hazy and his memories fogged, kept his anguish from finding voice. He tried to tell himself it wasn't true...

The emptiness in his heart denied him. Starbuck was dead. Iblis had won again.

Eventually, a question worked its way into his drugged brain. Why am I still alive?

He forced his eyes to open, daring himself to face his surroundings, whatever they might be.

Life Centre? A private cubicle? I'm still alive! He saw a familiar figure, a med tech he knew. I'm still on the OSIRIS! Could it all have been a dream, a nightmare?

But it wasn't so; the ache wouldn't go away. His hands clenched at his sides. Starbuck is dead. What about Diana, and Morgan — and the child? Did Iblis take them all, and leave me alive? Can even he be so cruel?

Yes...

Watching the med tech walk away, Apollo wondered how difficult it would be to die, and how soon he could arrange it.

"If you do that, Iblis will truly have won." A familiar form appeared alongside his bed, staring intently at him with serious blue eyes.

"Starbuck? Starbuck! You're not dead!" He grabbed weakly for his friend's hand; he caught nothing.

"Uh, 'fraid you're wrong on that one, buddy."

"What?" Apollo demanded uncomprehendingly.

Starbuck shrugged, a small grin on his face. "I gambled. I won. I finally found a winning system. So you're still here. And Diana, and Morgan, and the child. You're all going to be okay." The confident smile was so typically Starbuck that Apollo knew this was no demon's trick.

He tried to concentrate. "Wasn't Alexandra with you? And Hannibal, and Cy?"

"They're safe, too, all of them — including that little 'mistake' of Alexandra's and mine."

"Why are you here?"

He shrugged again. "Every system has its flaws, especially mine. You should know that by now.

There was a variable I didn't take into account. Didn't make any difference about who won the game, but it did upset the bidding for a while."

"Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. How about you?"

"I don't know. How should I be? I'm tired, drained. I saw you die. I don't know if I want to live."

"You have to, buddy. You've still got a job to do. Besides, you owe me now. And you owe a lot to Diana, and to little Lia, when she comes. I know that's what you plan on calling her."

"Morgan's going to need some help for a while, too. Iblis wasn't kind to him, messed him up pretty bad. Do you know what it's like for a telepath, having to feel what we all were feeling? To feel me...die? To know every move Iblis planned to make, and not be able to do anything about it?"

"Well, maybe you do understand. You're almost telepathic, anyway, and I think Morgan rubs off on people. He helped you the last time Iblis tried to kill you. Now, it's your turn; help him through it. This time, he needs you a lot more than you need him. Find some way. I think Hannibal can help with that; he knows some interesting things about a lot of people on this ship, and he understands what happened down there."

"And one more thing -- something important to me. Alexandra's gonna need someone to lean on, too. You've still got Diana, and Morgan, and you can all support each other. But don't leave her out; don't let her withdraw from you. And you'll have to play 'Uncle' for me, 'cause I won't be here, not always, and not in all ways, and I'm still not sure what I'll be able to do. My kid's gonna need somebody like you around, to keep him or her in line. You and Morgan, I'll trust. But you have to promise you'll be here."

"I'll be here, Starbuck. I promise." He wasn't sure what he was promising, but if Starbuck asked for it...

"Thanks, old buddy. You'd better get some rest. The Commander's got a list of questions a mile long. Morgan won't be able to help for a while, and you'll have more to do than you care to before long."

"But don't forget, you can trust Hannibal. He's good at keeping secrets, and he was there with us."

Apollo managed a reluctant smile.

"And remember, whatever you go through, Iblis was worse -- and you survived. Diana, too. She needs you; they all do. When you remember me, remember why I gambled -- so you'd have a chance at life. Remember how much I liked living. Still do, come to think of it. Don't make that gamble in vain, Apollo. Don't waste my death."

Suddenly, his intensity vanished, melting away like snowflakes on a warm and sunny day. Starbuck reached into his jacket and pulled out what appeared to be a cigar -- although that was obviously impossible, wasn't it? Apollo's bewildered mind chose to accept it.

"Say, you wouldn't happen to have a light, would you? Oh, say hello to Morgan for me, will you? You won't be able to keep this from him, anyway. The others, I'll talk to when the time is right."

Especially Aley. She's better off as she is, for now, at least, and I'll want to see her myself. Take care of them, Apollo. See you around!"

With that, he vanished, leaving only a warm, glowing spot in Apollo's heart, and the beginning of another healing in his soul.

"Good-bye, Starbuck -- for now. I won't forget."

An astonished Doctor Senbl overheard only the last words, and immediately ordered another sedative for his patient. But by the time Lavanna arrived with it, Apollo was asleep.

Well, she thought as she walked away, it was better if he slept naturally, peacefully, not tossing about and crying out at some invisible horror.

In his sleep, Apollo smiled.



### PART III: MURMURS

"Then what killed him?" Commander Christopher thundered. "You're supposed to be doctors, specialists. Are you trying to tell me that you can't determine how a man died?"

Doctor Lupus, medical examiner and pathologist aboard the OSIRIS, seemed to wilt.

"Sir, we've been trying," Doctor Senbl interrupted. "You could as easily tell us! According to all our tests, Lieutenant Starbuck simply stopped living, and we simply don't know why. Everything's in the proper place, and there doesn't seem to be any anatomical damage of any kind, except for two small knife wounds, which did not contribute to his death. He just stopped breathing; his heart stopped beating; his brain stopped functioning.

"In short, he died. From one micron to the next, his body simply ceased to function.

"The stories those Warriors of yours have been telling us are of very little help. If he was struck by some kind of energy beam or lightning bolt, there should be marks of it somewhere on his body — but there's nothing, no scars, no burns. Nothing!" He gestured at the report lying on the Commander's desk. "I cross-checked everything Pathology did, then Doctor Lupus cross-checked me.

"We're at a loss, sir, a total loss. It's as if the Lieutenant's spirit went for a walk, and forgot to take his body along."

The Commander of the OSIRIS snorted in disgust, drumming his fingers on the autopsy report, which told him absolutely nothing. Doctor Lupus huddled deeper in his chair, his dark face betraying the sorrow he always felt at having to autopsy the bodies of his fellow crewmembers. Doctor Senbl's face was flushed a dangerous shade of red at the unintended insult handed his department.

Christopher took a deep breath to calm his thinking. "So that's your answer, doctor? He 'went for a walk' among the stars, and didn't come back? How in Hades am I supposed to put that at the end of the man's service record? Senbl, give me something that at least has some semblance of sanity!"

"Captain Apollo insists he should get a commendation. Mark it, and leave the rest of that damned sheet blank!"

"I can't do that. A death certificate needs a cause of death, and you gentlemen still haven't supplied one."

The Senior Medical Officer's urbane mask slipped momentarily, and the heartfelt expletive he uttered shocked his companions. "Try heart failure, then! Or 'cause unknown! Now, if you don't mind, Commander, I have work to do today!" The refined aristocrat stalked from the Commander's office.

In grim silence, Christopher wrote "heart failure" on the certificate ending Starbuck's existence as a Warrior and Colonial citizen. In equal silence, Doctor Lupus, as medical examiner, duly no-

tarized the form. He was on his way out of the office as the Commander made one final entry on the record of Lieutenant Starbuck, of Caprica and the battlestars GALACTICA and OSIRIS -- a request for the award Apollo had recommended.

\* \* \* \* \*

The drowsiness wouldn't pass, even when he thought he wanted to wake up again. He'd been conscious for a while, he remembered, but they'd given him something, and he'd fallen asleep again. They'd been drugging him, he was sure -- but enough was enough. There were things he had to do, and he couldn't get them done if they kept him in a sedated fog. He couldn't get oriented to reality...

"You'd better rest while you can, buddy," Starbuck advised.

With great effort, he pried his eyelids open. The image was blurred, but recognizable. Yes, he was still in Life Centre -- and yes, that was Starbuck talking to him...

"Are you still dead?" he asked, and was surprised when Starbuck laughed.

"Apollo, your head's in the wrong place!" The amused chuckle was completely carefree, and he immediately thought he'd made a mistake.

Maybe Starbuck was never dead, or maybe I'm still dreaming...

He'd been doing a lot of that -- fuzzy images that hovered at the edges of his vision, murmurs on distant winds, soul-bright sounds he could barely hear, soothing thoughts that made no sense...

"Was Iblis...?" he asked dreamily. Maybe...

"You're still in the wrong place. This is the real world, and Iblis was in it, so I'm not any more. But you still are. Have I managed to confuse you again?"

"Totally." Starbuck was teasing him. He fretted about it, but his friend only laughed again, and sat down next to him. Apollo thought he was becoming more coherent -- or maybe the vision or dream was finally starting to obey his conscious command to make some sense.

"So Iblis was real, and you died. You stood up to him. How come I couldn't?"

"You did...the last time...and the time before that, remember?"

"But, this time..."

"Maybe too much at stake, or too close to home? It wasn't easy, buddy. I don't envy you your experiences with him -- and I wouldn't wish my death on anyone! I was scared! He was going to kill me, and there was nothing I could do about it. All I could hope was that it would help, somehow, and that the right people -- well, beings -- would know when I died, and that I didn't make a terrible mistake. I tried shooting him once before, and that didn't do any good. Maybe there are things you have to die for, things that worthwhile..." he finished introspectively.

Where did he get that cigar? He shouldn't be smoking here...

"But, did you have to die for me? Does everyone I love have to die for me?"

"Don't be ridiculous, Captain. It was my own choice. And it seemed a fair trade -- me for all

of us, one for many."

"Is that the philosophy of spirits?" That damned cigar -- I can even smell it! He didn't remember smelling things in his previous dreams -- but maybe he wouldn't remember this one, either, in a few moments, when it all faded into the background haze.

"Me, a philosopher? Hey, I'm a gambler! I faced Iblis, and I was scared. He wanted you, and I couldn't stand by and let him win. If he'd killed you then, we'd all have failed. And where would we be now, if that had happened?" Starbuck demanded, waving his cigar, blowing a ring of sweet-smelling smoke in Apollo's direction.

"I guess fear can overcome all of us. I pray I never come to that again, to despair so deeply..." He mused on the nature of despair, while another part of his mind ridiculed the nature of his present drug-induced fantasy. If Lavanna would just stop sedating him, and he were permitted to wake up enough to show them that he was all right...

He felt a light touch on his hand, fleeting, but warm and comforting. Starbuck's voice penetrated the thickening haze in his mind; he was slipping away again.

"Apollo, buddy, I love you, and I'd do it again, without hesitation. Just remember that -- I'd do it again..."

Words, image, touch... All were fading away. "I love you, too. Just wish..." He drew a deep breath. "Ouch!" he complained at the sudden stab of pain in his arm; then he lost any sense of consciousness.

The med tech was still bent over her patient as she spoke worriedly to the doctor standing behind her. "He was talking again, doctor, but I don't know to whom. How much longer are we to keep sedating him, and the others?"

Doctor Senbi studied his patient's vital signs. "Until we're certain there's no permanent physical damage. Then, we'll wake them, and check for psychological injuries. If what Captain Hannibal says took place really did..." He shook his head skeptically, then suddenly sniffed the air in the isolation chamber. "Lavanna, has anyone been smoking in here recently?"

She looked puzzled. "Smoking? Not in the last few centars. Why?"

"I distinctly smell cigar smoke..."

\* \* \* \* \*

Apollo gazed somberly at Starbuck's serene, untroubled face, resting in the transparent tube that would carry him into the nuclear fires of a nearby star, one the size and magnitude of Caprica's primary sun. There were still a few centons before the tube would be sealed, before the ceremony would begin. He carefully disarranged his friend's neatly combed hair. That's how Starbuck always seemed to be, a little scattered, never quite perfect. He'll feel more at rest this way...

Was it all a dream...?

Apollo still felt as if he were moving through a haze, unsure what was real and what was merely hallucination. He thought he'd seen Starbuck standing at his bedside during that long sedated sleep, and he wasn't sure what had happened on that nameless planet -- or even if the planet itself was anything more than an old nightmare in a new form.





—Mel. White—

Maybe this is all a dream. This...thing...doesn't feel like Starbuck. It's cold and still, as if carved in stone... Yet, paradoxically, it's the same man I've known and cared about and shared my life with for yahrens...

Starbuck was still warm and alive in his heart, as he would always be in his memory.

"He died for us." Diana took his hand; there were unshed tears in her voice.

He pulled her into his arms. She was real, warm and alive — and filled with sorrow. It was all real, he knew — horribly, painfully, unavoidably real — but Starbuck would never want them to react this way...

In this death, he thought, there was still life — their own lives, the life of the child Diana would bear, the life of Alexandra's child — and Starbuck's...

"We'll never forget him," he said in a hushed voice. "He'll never let us."

Doctor Elara, the battlestar's staff psychologist, watched them thoughtfully as they stood beside the funerary tube. None of them belonged here, she thought; only Hannibal was fit to return to any semblance of duty.

Morgan had refused to be present at these simple services for his friend; he was barricaded in his lab, in the celestial chamber, refusing to allow anyone to enter. Alexandra, staring now at the brilliant yellow star that awaited Starbuck's body, wouldn't say a word about Starbuck; she hadn't shed a single tear. Diana, on the other hand, had cried in public, for the first time Elara could remember.

And Apollo was acting very strangely indeed, watching everything with a child-like innocence, as if it were all so new and different for him that he couldn't understand it all at once, as if his mind had gone to some distant place none of them could reach, where everything was pleasant, and pain wasn't real...

People continued to file into the chamber; those closest to Starbuck filed past the tube to say their final farewells. Alexandra turned away from the port at last, and joined Apollo and Diana.

"Was this necessary?" she asked, staring at the corpse. "Why did you have to die?"

"He died for all of us," Apollo said gently.

She gazed at him blankly for a moment. "No, Captain, he died for you." She stroked Starbuck's cheek. "We could've stayed here. He didn't have to follow you."

"It was his choice, his decision. Don't demean it," he replied to her unspoken accusation. "And you chose to follow him..."

She looked away from him.

Apollo considered telling her that he had seen Starbuck, and what his friend had said, but decided against it. This was neither the time nor the place for such a revelation. Starbuck had said he would talk to her himself, when the time was right. For now, let's just get this necessary ritual over with, and let life go on...

Alexandra gazed down on Starbuck's face, so calm and untroubled in his final sleep, his hair disarranged so naturally...

The small groups of people, both military and civilian, came to attention as Commander Christopher entered the chamber, his wife Major Meret at his side. Apollo and Diana stood with their arms around each other; Alexandra was joined by her wingman, Lieutenant Gregory, and her cousin, Sergeant Galatea, who took her hands as the ceremony began. Morgan remained absent.

The ceremony ended, far too soon. Starbuck was gone.

\* \* \* \* \*

A man sat alone in the darkness of the locked celestial chamber.

In the light, he was a tall, strong man, with green eyes and golden hair. But now, he was only a shadow, hiding amongst shadows, as he had done for several days. He'd been present at Starbuck's funeral -- through the minds of others.

He had seen the coffin begin its final, lonely journey. He wanted nothing more to do with it.

There was a sound at the door; someone fumbled at the lock. But Morgan had sealed the door with more than just a mechanical lock. Eventually, his would-be visitor gave up on entering, and moved away.

Morgan sighed, and gazed out at the stars, half-consciously scanning and categorizing each point of light -- a useful discipline, born of yahrens as an astrophysicist. It helped to keep his mind off the events of the past sections, and helped to block the hammering thoughts he could not always escape any longer.

He sighed again.

It had been a rendezvous with death, for all of them. Starbuck had thrown himself into something he couldn't handle, and had died for it. His death had given them a chance -- but he was gone, his body only a brief flare of light in a brilliant sun. So, too, his life -- a brief flare in an ever-changing universe...

Iblis had used him. And if Starbuck hadn't intervened, Iblis would have killed him. The slime of Iblis' consciousness had laughed as Morgan writhed in pain, had gleefully smirked as Apollo's madness, Diana's horror, and Starbuck's death had branded themselves into his being.

He would never forget that scene, not if he lived for all eternity. He only prayed that time might dull it enough, make it hazy enough, that he could block it out, and rebuild his shattered defences.

Maybe then, the emotions of this ship and her lost people won't hurt so much. Maybe then, I'll be able to face my friends without flinching from their thoughts...

It was over a centar before he heard another sound at the door. Although the lock refused to yield, the person wouldn't leave.

"Morgan?" a quiet voice called. Despite the engines' roar, he heard the man clearly; the voice echoed through his mind as if through an endless tunnel. He knew the man well -- Apollo.

"Go away." He flung the thought back, rejecting the call. He knew he would be heard.

"Morgan? Let me in."

He surrendered, as Apollo had known he must, and released his hold on the lock. The door opened, admitting another tall figure into the darkness. Then the flood of light and noise vanished as the hatch cycled shut again.

The Captain stumbled in the dark, then eventually touched Morgan's shoulder, and settled down beside him. Morgan heard the clink of a bottle being opened, then liquid sloshing into a glass.

The glass was pushed into his hands.

"I don't want it."

"Take it. It's M'dori, one of Jason's special brews. I don't know how it's different, but it seems...greener, like Diana's eyes. He didn't ask any questions, either, just looked sympathetic, and said it would help. So, drink it."

He took the glass, anticipating an order if he didn't. Apollo poured himself a glass as well, then set the long-necked bottle carefully aside, where he could reach it easily, but where it wouldn't accidentally be spilled or broken.

Morgan sipped the drink. It had a definite tang he couldn't remember from any other M'dori he'd ever tasted.

They sat in silence for a long time. When the first glasses were empty, Apollo poured a second round.

"Getting drunk won't help me," the telepath said at last. "It might make things worse. I don't think anything can help me now."

He could sense Apollo's shrug. "No, nothing can erase what Iblis did, what Starbuck sacrificed. But we're still alive."

"Are we? You think that's all that counts?" To Morgan, to any telepath, this terribly open vulnerability was perhaps worse than death. "Do you realize what Iblis did, to all of us?"

"I've an idea what he tried to do."

"Then why are you here?"

"I promised a friend I'd be around when you needed me. And I care about you. You can't spend the rest of your life up here, cutting yourself off from us."

"I have to."

"Why?"

"Don't you understand? I can't protect myself any more, not even from you and Diana. I keep seeing it all, over and over again. I keep feeling it. I know what it is to die, Apollo, because I died with Starbuck. And, sometimes, I think I'm still dead, barely existing -- and not particularly liking it."

"You're alive. Things aren't as bleak as they seem. We'll live. We'll manage -- all of us."

Several long moments passed in silence, as Morgan wrestled with trying to understand Apollo's

serenity -- without being overwhelmed by his friend's thoughts and emotions.

"How's Diana?" he finally asked, seeking a new subject. "I haven't seen her since..."

"She's missed you. And Life Centre confirmed her pregnancy today. I'm not sure it's hit her yet. She's still mourning Starbuck."

"What about you? Aren't you mourning him? He was your closest friend..."

Apollo's smile, invisible in the darkness, was like a flare to Morgan's hypersensitive mind. "I mourn his death, but he's not gone. That's some consolation."

The telepath shuddered, shying away from a thought too terrifying to consider. "The nights are the worst. I can block it during the day, sitting here, or in my Viper, keeping myself too busy to think or feel. But at night, there's nothing between me and the memories, nothing to hold them off..."

"I know," Apollo replied softly. "Sometimes, Diana wakes up without knowing why -- but I can hear you screaming in my mind."

"I'm sorry. I don't mean to disturb you..."

"You can't help it. How can I blame you for your nightmares?"

They were silent again for a time. Apollo shifted slightly, almost soundlessly. The stars slowly wheeled past.

"How about Alexandra?" the telepath asked.

"I don't know yet. She hasn't come to see me, or Diana. Officially, I can't do anything until she does. I hope it's soon."

"She's scared, worried -- a little lost, maybe. Perhaps nothing would have come of her relationship with Starbuck, but it was all she had. She's lost the only anchor she had. You know, she still hasn't cried for him."

"I know."

Morgan was surprised by Apollo's quiet certainty. "Is there something you came here to tell me?" he asked, no longer able to avoid the subject.

"You've been wondering how I've known things since...then, why I haven't mourned him as you do. He's not gone, Morgan. Starbuck still has some time to spend with us."

"What do you mean?" As close to insanity as Morgan was sure he was, he now wondered if Apollo might not have gone even farther.

"He hasn't talked to you yet."

"I don't understand..."

But he did, through a flash of Apollo's knowledge, and someone else's mental touch.

"Don't you, Morgan?" A glowing, spectral form appeared from nowhere. The smile was Starbuck's --



mel. White  
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it could belong to no other. The thoughts, too, were familiar.

"Starbuck?" Morgan whispered.

"Who else could pop in on you up here, when you're riding in the hand of God?" the apparition replied, glancing at Apollo; they shared that memory.

The Captain remained silent. He'd already met and come to terms with Starbuck and his continued existence without mortal human life. It was Morgan's turn.

"How can you be alive?"

"I'm not exactly alive, Morgan."

"Then how can you be here?"

The glowing figure smiled again, warm and comforting in the darkness. "I'm not really sure myself," he readily confessed. "But I do know I'm here. Not to change the subject, but why are you so afraid of living?"

The telepath shuddered. "If I live, I have to feel. I'm a bit afraid of feeling too much right now."

"Hey, even I'm alive, Morgan, after a fashion. And feeling many things." Starbuck frowned, trying to find the words for an adequate explanation.

"I'm seeing things, aren't I, Apollo?" Morgan demanded shakily. "It's just part of that 'special' M'dori. Jason did something to it... Either that, or I really am crazy..."

"What do you feel?"

"Lords, he's real, and he's here, and Iblis didn't win after all!" His eyes burned with unshed tears; his voice was unsteady.

"Iblis will never win," Apollo replied. "We'll never come so close to surrender again. He'll never even dare come near us, now, if he escapes again. Starbuck will know."

Morgan glanced at the silent figure of Starbuck, who leaned against one of the dome's supporting panels, his arms crossed, a white shape outlined by the stars. The image nodded slowly.

"Starbuck..." He reached out a hand, but touched nothing; there were only shadows and silence.

Starbuck shook his head. "Sorry, Morgan, but you can't touch me. I can't touch you, either. But I'm here — and who knows what time will do to me?"

"But you don't have to dream any more. Iblis lost. I can walk your dreams, and guard them, if you want me to."

The telepath managed a smile. "I think I'd better try and manage that on my own. But it's nice to know I'm not alone."

"Never, my friend. You know that. I'll always be here, in some way." The apparition began to fade. "Watch my lady for me, will you, Morgan? For now, at least? Apollo says he will, but I know Diana's got to come first for him. Probably for you, too, for that matter. But make sure my

Aley isn't forgotten. The others'll get over me soon enough, but she's got a little...reminder. Just keep an eye on her, huh? And don't let her cut you out..."

He was gone.

Morgan sat in awe-struck silence. For all he'd thought he knew, this was beyond any experience he'd ever even dreamed.

"Do you understand?" Apollo asked quietly. "Ibils never won. He never will. There's too much at stake to allow it. In striking at Starbuck as he did, he bound himself, even more than...before, with Sheba and me. We're free of him now -- forever. Seeing death, this way, can you really fear it any longer? Even Starbuck knows better -- and that's saying a lot!"

The telepath shook his head, smiling slightly, and Apollo could sense the tension loosening within him, could sense the growing peace -- like the peace within himself, the certain knowledge that there was still life to live, and worth living.

"There are people I can talk to," Morgan began tentatively. "Maybe we can work something out..."

"I know some things about people, too. For a start..."

"For a start, pour me another, will you, Apollo?"

"Sure. I'll even join you."

\* \* \* \* \*

Clearing Starbuck's quarters didn't require much time.

Apollo took the depressingly sad duty upon himself, several days after his talk with Morgan. He and Starbuck had been through too much together for too long, as wingmates and as friends, for him to allow anyone else to do it.

Furnishings would remain for the chamber's next occupant. Personal effects were quickly, neatly packed into a storage box. Before the Destruction, the box would have been returned to the family of the deceased, carried home by friends and fellow Warriors.

Now, with no person or place to take them to, Apollo wondered why the things were kept stored away. Perhaps, he thought, Chameleon would want them when the OSIRIS reached the Fleet, some time in the future.

Or maybe Alexandra will claim them for her child. She probably has the best claim on them, if she wants them... A small box of odds and ends...

She still hadn't mentioned her pregnancy to him; if she didn't soon, he'd have to bring it up himself. Officially, he didn't know about it, but he was her Flight Commander... She shouldn't be flying, but if she hadn't yet made up her mind about having the baby, he didn't want to push her into a hasty, and perhaps unwise, decision.

Fortunately, the doctors hadn't yet approved her return to combat duty; it took any decision out of his hands for a few days.

Starbuck seemed to think there was no doubt about her ultimate decision. Apollo wondered if his friend could somehow sense the future in his present "condition" -- or if he simply understood



Alexandra that well.

And then there's Diana's pregnancy...

Apollo smiled. He was already looking forward to his daughter, a child he'd anticipated for years. We'll be a real family...

He regretted for a moment that his father might never meet his granddaughter, and that his mother would never know her namesake. But then, who knew what the future held? Perhaps it wouldn't be long before the OSIRIS was reunited with the rest of humanity's survivors. The Commander would be pleased to see Diana alive and safe after so long -- his foster daughter, and, finally, Apollo's wife. And she had found her own father, too, in Major Dion.

That would be a pleasant surprise. Adama and his wife had always accepted and blessed the love shared by their eldest son and their foster child; they had been glad for their children's happiness. And Diana would love Boxey as her own -- for Apollo's sake, if for no other reason.

Of course, Starbuck wouldn't be there...

How will I tell Chameleon...?

But the old gambler was probably already reconciled to his son's death; there was no reason to pass along the exact circumstances. And Chameleon, too, would have a grandchild to meet -- providing, of course, that Alexandra chose to keep her child.

Everything was collected, packed carefully into the small box, ready for storage; a Supply tech would come for it in a short time. Apollo sat down on the neatly-made bunk, glancing around at the clean, sterile quarters.

It's so different without all the little things he kept around... Strictly regulation, completely uncluttered...

It was like a dream, he thought. With Starbuck gone, it was almost like it had been before he had come to the OSIRIS, that crazy day they'd almost fired on him in a Raider.

But it will never be the same... Too much has happened...

He'd hear Starbuck's laughter in these corridors for the rest of his life -- and sometimes, he suspected, it would really be there...

And Cy, too. He wondered if Cylons believed in spirits, and how Cy would react to seeing Starbuck again after consigning his body to the stellar fires. Maybe the mechanical being wouldn't even be able to see or hear him; a Cylon's ocular device didn't track exactly the way a human eye did -- and it was possible Starbuck spoke through the mind, not by means of voice and ears...

"Oh!"

Startled, Apollo glanced up, to see Alexandra standing in the doorway. She was poised to leave.

"Wait, Alex."

She froze, her back to him. "Yes, Captain?"

"Come and sit down," he invited. "Is there anything special you came to look for? I've just

packed his things away, but if there's some memento... And I won't mind your company."

"I just came in for a centon, but since you've already cleaned everything out, I won't take up any of your time," she responded quietly. Her face was calm, empty of emotion.

"Well, there are a couple of things I'd like to discuss with you, if you have a few moments." Maybe now's the time to tell her Starbuck's still...around, and likely to show up... She has a right to know...

She shrugged, but didn't approach him. "If you wish. You're the Captain."

"Would you please sit down?"

He thought for a moment that she would defy him. Then she reluctantly sat down on the edge of the bunk, as far from him as possible.

"There are some things I've been wanting to ask you," he began. Maybe, if he started the conversation, she'd mention the child, and her decision -- if she'd made one yet.

"What kind of things?" she asked in a monotone. There was suspicion hidden in her toneless voice. She was wary of his company.

"I wanted to ask...what you're feeling, thinking...if you'd care to talk about it, if you can, and if there's anything I can do, now that..."

"Now that Starbuck's gone?"

"Yes," he replied honestly. "I'd like to know, if you're willing to talk to me."

"Are you making it an order?"

"I hope not. You're a friend, Alex, and I care about you." After their experience with Iblis, they all needed such reassurances, and Apollo was determined to let his friends know he cared.

Her laugh was short and bitter. "What am I thinking?" She seemed to deflate. "I didn't think I cared about him this much," she muttered, and Apollo couldn't tell if she was trying to hide tears or was simply framing her words with great care.

"It's hard," she continued. "Very hard. I keep telling myself it's stupid, to think I could've meant anything special to him. We were friends, and occasionally, a bit more, but that's all, and should've been enough.

"He'd never settle down; I know that. He flirted with every woman he ever met, and he'd keep on doing it, no matter what he said to the contrary. It's his nature. It's not until now, when I'm pregnant, and he's dead, that I think I love him." She didn't seem to realize what she'd revealed. "Probably an illogical reaction, being upset like this, thinking it ever meant anything. When someone dies, you work yourself up until they mean more to you dead than they ever did alive. I ought to realize that, being a Warrior and all."

He watched her with concern. "I don't think that's true, Alexandra -- and we both know it. You did love him, and he felt something for you. And now..."

"I love him. Oh, I know -- like so many other women in his life, so many 'friends.' That's part of the problem, and the way I feel." The words and emotions poured out, things that surprised

him, and shocked him a little — and worried him a lot.

"I'm jealous, Apollo," she said intensely. "Jealous of anybody who had a part of his life, because now, there isn't any life left for me. I'm glad, too — maybe triumphant," — she tossed her head in pride — but why did she look as if she hated herself? — "because only I can give him a child now, if I choose to. Do we want to keep a part of Starbuck around, Captain?"

"And I realize, now, that I'm very possessive. I could never let myself be that way before, with him, because one look at Starbuck showed how foolish it was. No one woman was capable of holding him for long. He'd never let himself be captured, never let his heart be taken.

"But I'm holding him, now. I've got his child...

"I think I'm going crazy, Captain. My emotions, my capacity for rational thought — everything seems all screwed up, running in circles at full throttle, then throwing themselves into reverse and slamming into the walls of my locked-up head and suffocating heart. Am I going crazy?" She looked at him pleadingly, her brown eyes intense.

"I don't like them, the other women. Some of them were even my friends, and maybe still are, and I'm sure we'll be friends again some day. Strange, how my feelings and my head seem to have separated these days. I know what I should be feeling — but it's like I'm watching somebody else playing me, acting out my emotions on a stage."

Suddenly, her eyes turned cold, venomous, contemptuous. Apollo could feel the bitter enmity directed at him.

"You know what else the little actress is doing, Apollo? She's hating you. Yes, I hate you, Captain, I really do!" He stared at her in disbelief. "You were closer to him than any woman could ever be. For that, he was willing to follow you into Hades. When you wouldn't lead, he went on ahead for you! He gave up his life in that miserable cavern! He died for you, and he'd never do that for any woman! And you don't even care what he gave up for love of you! You smiled at his memorial!"

His own shock faded as he saw the despairing tears in her eyes. Her pain needed some kind of release, and Starbuck hadn't shown himself to her yet. Maybe hating him would satisfy her for now, but she had to pull her life back together again.

"Alexandra, you're misreading the friendship between Starbuck and me — and you've badly misread Starbuck if you think he didn't care, or wouldn't have endured that for you as well as for me. He died for you, too. I would have done it if necessary, for Diana, for my friends, my child. But Starbuck knew the way to save us all, while I could have done nothing but cost us all our lives. You know him, Alex. Isn't it true? Search your heart..."

She was nearly sobbing, trying to control the pain of her memories, and her fears. "But I can't! Logically, I know — or I think I know — but my heart and mind don't connect any more, and I don't know what to do, or where to go! I'm all alone!"

"You're not alone. We're here. You know, we were there, too, and we know Starbuck. We understand. We're your friends. Let us help you." Awkwardly, he reached across the bunk, to take her hand.

"Help?" She jerked her hand away from him. "Like you helped Starbuck to his grave?" She stared at him, unblinking and cold. "And I'm angry!" she declared, changing the subject abruptly, sending another deadly verbal shaft at Apollo. "He died, and left me alone, with his — our —

baby. How could he do that, if he really cared about me? How could he leave his child alone? How could he leave you?"

"Because he cared! Because he gambled on saving all of us!" He wasn't getting through to her, and knew it, but didn't know what else he could say. "He did what he thought he had to, for all of us."

"He told me I didn't know Iblis. Maybe I didn't. But I don't think I knew him, either. Oh, yes, maybe he really did care. But it doesn't matter. You let him die. He died because of you!" Her voice rose to a harsh, shrill cry, stunning him. In that brief moment, she ran from the room.

Tears welled in his eyes, and he brushed them away wonderingly, thinking hard for a long time, trying to understand her peculiar perspective without accepting the guilt it would place on his shoulders. He ran a hand through his hair, and took a deep breath.

Alexandra's warped view of things was tearing her apart. She seemed to have decided that Iblis, Apollo, and Starbuck were all equally guilty of some conspiracy that had taken her lover's life. Her reaction reached beyond mere pain, ignoring logic, and struck deeply into a part of his own past that he'd hoped to have buried forever.

After a time, Apollo rose, shaking his head, and walked to the door with a troubled, preoccupied look on his face.

A misty figure watched him leave, worry evident in his bright blue eyes. Even with the perpetrator banished, it seemed Iblis' evil would continue to reach out to the demon's foes.

\* \* \* \* \*

Apollo went in search of Morgan, and found his friend in the nearly deserted pilots' lounge, with two other members of Purple Squadron. Sergeant Arzigal, in a brilliantly-coloured caftan, was no surprise; the telepath considered her a friend. But the Captain was amazed to see Lieutenant Garnyd with them, since Morgan and Garnyd usually avoided each other's company.

However, apart from the three of them -- and Robin, busy behind the bar -- the only other people in the large, comfortable room were two young lovers holding hands in a corner. Under the circumstances, it was understandable that the two men were tolerating one another.

Apollo joined the Purple Squadron pilots. They welcomed him cordially enough -- but he had the distinct impression that he'd disturbed something. The feeling was reinforced a few moments later when Garnyd, draining his drink, abruptly rose to leave.

"I've an early stint in the computer core tomorrow," he explained, "so I should get some sleep. If you'll excuse me..."

"I, too, must be gone," Arzigal observed in her lightly accented voice. "If Flicka is not fed soon, she will come searching for me, and that will displease many people." She nodded elegantly in the Captain's direction, then departed, her voluminous robes billowing behind her. The Hsarril woman had adapted well to Colonial culture, overcoming many of her earlier fears of the strangers and their ways. Whatever rank she'd held in her own society -- and it had been high, from what little she'd mentioned to her few close friends -- she accepted her new life and position on the battlestar, and deferred to those in authority with no disgruntlement.

Apollo glanced at Morgan, perplexed. "What did I interrupt?"

The telepath smiled. "Nothing serious..."

"Just private?" Then inspiration struck him. "Some of that 'help' you needed? Sorry about that, Morgan. I didn't realize... I didn't know Garnyd was a telepath!" he finished in amazement. "He always seemed a bit odd, but..."

"He's not."

"Like Arzigal, then? Some kind of empath?"

"No..." Morgan replied slowly. "I really can't tell you anything about him. You'll have to ask him yourself. He might tell you, but more likely not..."

"I'll respect that; you know it," Apollo said seriously. "I'm glad to see you and Arzigal can talk to one another again, though. I know you couldn't bear to be around her for a while..."

The telepath smiled again, and got himself another drink. "Allahara's helping me," he said. "It is a bit complicated, and I doubt we've got all night for me to try and explain it. She's teaching me things I used to know..."

"That's good to hear."

"I wonder why I was so wary of her. After she saved my life, and I learned what she was... We got along fine, but I was always holding something back, always a bit afraid she'd find out something I wasn't ready to share."

Apollo laughed. "I guess there's something xenophobic in all of us. However liberal and open-minded we think ourselves, when it comes down to it, we're always a little afraid of the unknown."

The telepath's expression was wry. "After all the yahrens I've spent worrying about people discovering my little secret, and all of Karl's urging, I should've seen it in myself. This crew is supposed to be able to deal with the unknown. After all, if we can accept a telepathic bast, flying green 'Things,' an odd collection of other aliens..."

"Ah, but that's different! The obvious differences, we can deal with. We expect the unusual and unknown from the Shadowstars, from Arzigal and Allahara. It fascinates us. What worries us is the unexpected, the unknown amongst us. We've been together for so long that we think we know everything there is to know about one another. We prefer to look elsewhere for our surprises."

"An exploration ship with a semi-sane crew, the odd survivors of a war, and an assortment of beings from other worlds. If we can't deal with it, something's really odd!"

"Are you thinking of making your...gifts...public?" Apollo asked cautiously.

"Nothing that drastic, my friend! Like you said, the unexpected amongst us is what scares us. Something Garnyd said... Well, it's not important. Besides, I'm getting tired of philosophy. I've managed to make a few flights with Astrosurvey — but I never realized how boring life aboard a ship can be!"

Apollo laughed at his friend's expression. "Tell me about it! Now, you know how I felt when I first came aboard!" He sobered quickly. "I cleaned out Starbuck's quarters today, put his things into storage."

Morgan was silent for a moment. "Did he help?"

"Not that I could see. That wasn't the hard part. It was Alexandra. Some of the things she said..." He shook his head sadly. "She's really hurting inside, and she keeps trying to rationalize it all away, as if she's afraid to admit she feels anything. She's decided she hates me, and holds me responsible for Starbuck's death."

Morgan snorted in indignation.

"No, no, she may be right. I think she hates Starbuck a bit, too, for the position she's in. I don't know what'd be best for her right now. I told Hannibal to keep her off all test flights, and Doctor Senbi won't let any of us fly patrols yet. I wish... I don't know."

His companion was silent for a moment, commiserating. "If she's still that shaken up, I'd better stay away for a day or two myself. I don't think I've got enough control back yet to keep her emotions out, and misery seems to be one of the strongest feelings there is."

"I understand that, too," Apollo murmured. "We've each seen enough pain, experienced enough suffering in our own lives. We don't have to go looking for more. But, sometimes, I can't help wondering..."

"Starbuck?"

"Alexandra thinks it's my fault." He shuddered as he mentally pictured the cave where his friend had died.

Morgan closed his eyes, wincing at the pain of the emotion. "Please, Apollo, not around me. Not yet."

"I'm sorry. It's just that...it's hard not to remember."

"I know."

\* \* \* \* \*

Diana sat at her desk, absently watching Draco flitting about the compartment; she was waiting for Apollo. She appeared perfectly composed; in this instance, her appearance was misleading, a clear sign of danger. When the door opened, she swivelled her chair to observe her husband's entrance.

His cheerful humming stopped when he saw her, and he smiled. "Hello, love. How are you feeling?"

"You're aware that I'm pregnant."

There was laughter in his green eyes as he responded. "Of course, I know. You told me yourself, remember? We've known for several days."

"Doctor Senbi suggested I talk with you before he's willing to set a time for the termination." She was as calm and precise as if ordering a routine patrol, but something dangerous was seething in her eyes.

Apollo froze, staring in open-mouthed shock. "Termination...?" The centers of drinking with Morgan were affecting him; he staggered slightly. "You can't be serious."

She nodded emphatically. "I'm deadly serious, Apollo."

"What?" he sputtered.

"Besides, I don't think this is an appropriate time to be starting a family."

"No!" he exclaimed, his voice rising in anger.

"No, what?" she demanded, her eyes narrowing.

"You can't!"

She stared at him coldly, dangerously. "What can't I do?"

"Terminate my child!"

She stood up, facing him, her own temper flaring. "Then, you resign your commission and carry it! I'm not ready for a child -- not now, and maybe not ever!"

"I forbid it!" he snapped. "You can't possibly..."

"Apollo," Diana began, trying to be reasonable, "you can't honestly mean you'd force me to resign my commission and leave the Service to have a child we never planned, at a time not of my choosing? You know I love you, but..."

The alcohol in his system spoke for him. "I would think," he said angrily, "that my wife would be happy to bear my child. Instead, you want to kill it!"

"Your wife? Aren't I a warrior, too? Would you insist Laia have a child she didn't want? Or any of our other female personnel, for that matter?" she demanded in astonished rage. Her fury at the doctor's cavalier attitude had been redirected; Apollo was now its target.

"You're not just another pilot! You're my wife! I love you, and I want you to have my child!"

"Whether I want it or not? Is that the price of your love? Then talk to one of those little filirts who keep making eyes at you -- oh, I see them, Apollo, even though you don't encourage them. We're a little past the era when a man could force his wife to be his brood mare! I don't jump at your command!"

"I'm your Flight Commander, your superior officer!" he bellowed in outrage.

"In duty, yes -- but not in this marriage!" He was being totally unreasonable -- as she might have guessed he'd be; the way he moved and spoke clearly told her he was drunk. "I must admit, Apollo, that I never expected this of you. Morgan wouldn't..."

"Leave your old lover out of this for once, will you, Diana? Damn it, if every woman thought this way..."

Deathly pale at his reference to Morgan, Diana glared at him. "It appears," she said icily, "that our definitions of women's rights and options are polarized, Captain. But I will not live my life by someone else's definitions and rules. If you can't accept that, then perhaps we should reconsider another part of our lives as well!"

He regarded her for a long moment before speaking again. "I had a dream once," he said, his voice subdued, controlled. "It was yahrens ago, on the GALACTICA. I saw our daughter. I've loved her ever since, and I've been waiting for her. Will you fight destiny?"



How dare he...! "Destiny? Destiny! A half-remembered dream, and a lot of wishful thinking on your part? Who made you the all-mighty prophet? What makes you think the universe revolves around you, and your dreams? I'm not going through that again -- not even for you.

"Look, I'm a Warrior. I've earned that, and it's what I've been all my life. And I'm not throwing it away for..."

His eyes widened, and he looked sick. "That's what Zac said, just before... Starbuck told me; he felt a little guilty for a while, and now, he's gone, too... Don't talk that way, Diana! Please, don't!" he begged, staring at the floor.

She wondered why she suddenly wanted to cry. "Apollo..." she began.

"Don't kill my child," he whispered, pleading, with a look in his eyes that she remembered well -- and that she had hoped never to see again. The beloved dead, the lost friends, the haunting fears and nightmares...

Her control snapped. "No!" she screamed, and grabbed the first thing within reach.

He must have realized what was coming, for he started in alarm, and retreated with a speed surprising for a man in his condition.

The object struck the wall and shattered. Diana stared at the fragments of marble, all that remained of the sculpture of Apollo she had received as an anonymous birthday gift years before.

She hated herself for crying. Then her tears ended in a sudden gasp of pain, and she doubled over. No one heard her frightened call for help as she collapsed on the floor.

\* \* \* \* \*

Two young Flight Sergeants from Orange Squadron climbed out of the Raider, talking excitedly. Even Darian, normally so reticent, was elated; and Naradecici, once a shy and frightened Cadet, was positively ecstatic.

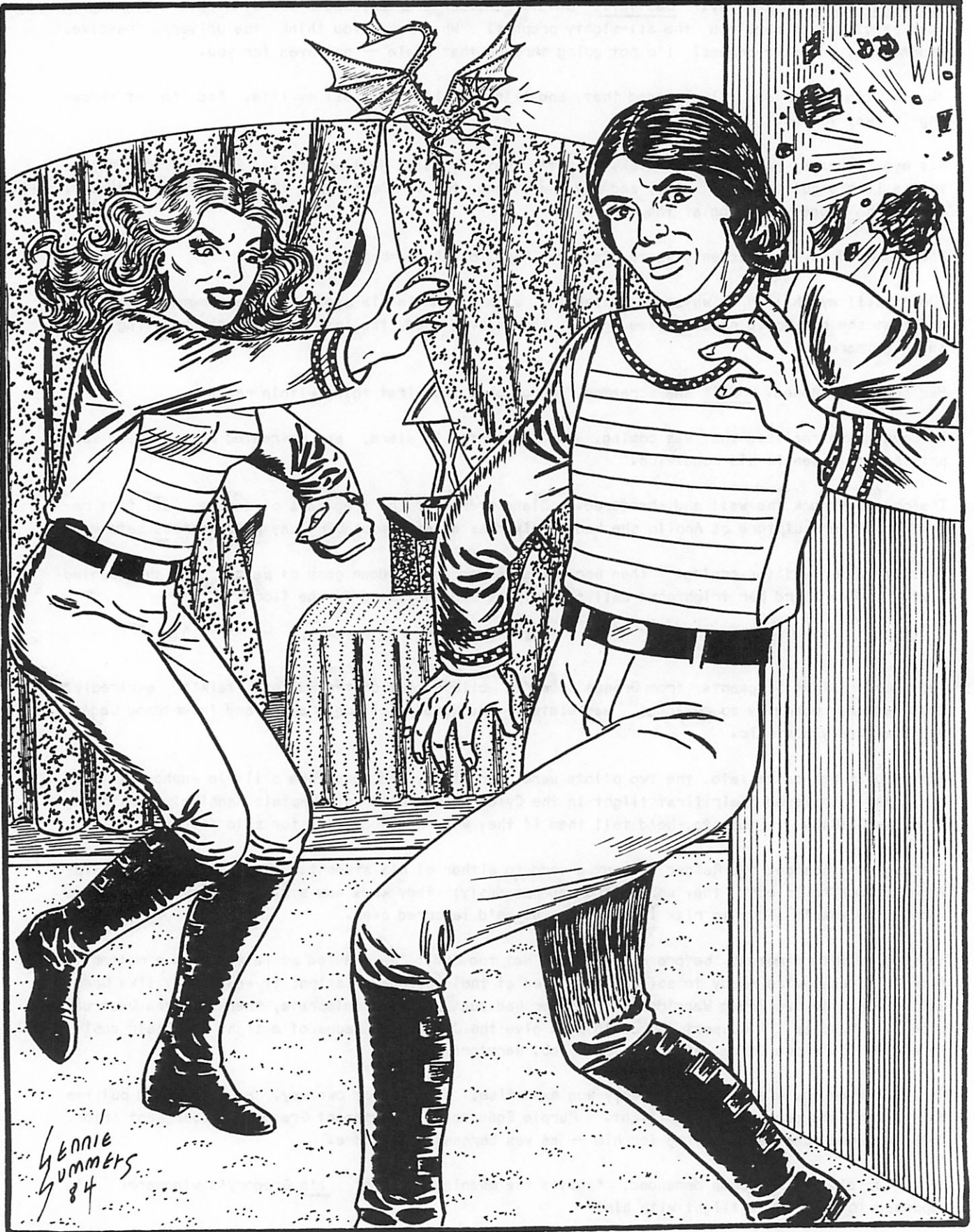
Although it was quite late, the two pilots were both alert, and more than a little euphoric. They had just completed their first flight in the Cylon ship, with only Captain Hannibal monitoring from the OSIRIS. In moments, he'd tell them if they were now qualified for solo flights.

The Engineer boarded the Raider without a word to either of his students. By the time he had finished checking it out, they were fidgeting nervously; they knew how stringent his requirements were -- he wasn't about to risk lives, or ships he'd laboured over.

He studied them a moment before speaking. "Not too bad," he drawled at last. "As a matter of fact, I think you're ready to solo." He smiled at their evident elation; it was almost like Graduation Day, for two young Warriors who'd never had such a day to celebrate, thanks to the Destruction... "Ladies, I suspect you could both give the Cylons one Hades of a fight for their cubits -- and in their own ships, at that. Good job, Warriors."

He left them to celebrate their newly-won expertise, each in her own way, as he checked out the next two pilots due for a test flight. Purple Squadron -- Lieutenant Gregory and Sergeant Arion. Both men were ready and waiting for him -- as was Sergeant Alexandra.

"But, Captain," the woman demanded, "what's the meaning of this? I'm Gregory's wingmate! I'm supposed to go on this flight with him!"



"Sorry, Sergeant," the Captain replied sympathetically, when he could manage to get a word in; he really did feel sorry for her, but he had his orders. "I'm afraid you're out of the program, at least for the time being."

"Why? By whose orders?"

"The Flight Commander's."

Her expression changed abruptly, as she re-established her self-control. "I see," she said in a strangled voice. "Then I guess I have to see him." She fled the landing bay, throwing off Gregory's restraining hand, and ignoring his call.

"That's one very upset lady," Arion commented.

"Not surprising," Hannibal said brusquely. "Not to hurry you, boys, but you're due in space. Flight check-list begins immediately." He left neither man time for further consideration of the woman's unseemly outburst.

\* \* \* \* \*

As she had planned, Arzigal had taken Flicka to the NCO mess for a quick meal. As they strolled back toward their shared quarters, they passed Diana's door. The Hsarri was somewhat surprised to see a tiny violet reptile fluttering madly in front of that door, occasionally breathing a small jet of flame toward the unyielding metal.

"Draco!" the alien woman exclaimed, laughing. "Have you been locked out again? You should never have attacked Captain Apollo when you first met him!"

Drawn by her friendly voice, the miniature dragon flew to her, landing in her dark hair, crying piteously in her ear. The dire wolf ran to the door, clawing at it, whining in desperation.

#### Something is wrong...!

Arzigal caught up her ankle-length caftan and ran to the door. If it was locked... But it wasn't; it slid open easily.

"Oh!" She slammed one hand over an emergency call button just inside the door, then hurried to her friend's side.

She was no Healer. She hoped they would come soon, and that they could help. Diana's life was in danger.

\* \* \* \* \*

Apollo, Morgan, and Major Dion kept a seemingly endless vigil through the night, waiting for word on Diana.

When Doctor Senbl joined them, it was nearly morning. He saw Apollo's mute, hopeful gaze, and shook his head. "I'm sorry, Captain. Diana will be all right, but there was nothing we could do to save the baby. Believe me, we tried."

Apollo sat down heavily, his face hidden behind his hands.



mel. white  
3/17/84

"In a way, Captain, the miscarriage may be partly our fault. We didn't know about her pregnancy, and the medication we gave her... We never even suspected, then. I'm sorry, Apollo, truly I am."

When the doctor left them, Dion followed him, wanting to see his daughter for a moment. Morgan put a comforting arm around Apollo's shoulders.

"She was right, it's my fault..." Apollo murmured.

"What? Who's right, about what?"

"Alexandra said it was my fault. Iblis killed Starbuck. Now, he's killed our child, my daughter, my Ila..." He stared past Morgan, speaking more to himself than to his friend.

"No!" the telepath insisted firmly. "Iblis had nothing to do with this. And it's certainly not your fault. I'll have a talk with Alex; I've known her longer than you. She's just upset. Will you be all right by yourself? Diana's going to need strength from you, not fear."

Apollo took a deep breath. "Thanks, Morgan, but knowing the truth of something doesn't make forgetting -- or remembering -- any easier. I think you'd better stay away from Alexandra. She's being poisonous right now -- and she might unleash it on you, too. I...just need a few centons. Go and see Diana; I'll be right with you."

Those few moments helped Apollo calm his turbulent thoughts and regain his self-control. Then he went in to see his wife.

"Hello, Diana." He was shocked at how weak and pale she looked.

"Hi..."

He tried to smile, despite the tears spilling down his cheeks. Just being with her took away some of the pain of the past. "You're all right, love. You're going to be all right."

"The baby..."

"It's all right," he insisted, trying to soothe her.

"No..." She shook her head with all the strength she could muster. "I know...how much you wanted it. I could see it in your eyes, how much you wanted this child. But I...wasn't ready. I'm sorry... I didn't plan this, but there wouldn't have been any other way, no matter what..."

"Hush! That's an order." He stroked her damp, limp hair. Lords, how he loved her! To ask her to set aside her life... He didn't want her feeling guilty about the baby; it wasn't fair of him. He had to respect her wishes, too, her choices. The alcohol-induced insistence of a few centars earlier seemed ridiculous, viewed now, after her brush with death.

I could have lost her!

"It's nothing to worry about, Diana," he whispered. "We've got plenty of time... There's nothing we can do, only live as best we can..."

"I didn't do this to hurt you, Apollo. Please, don't let it hurt you. I couldn't bear that..."

"You'd better leave, Captain," Doctor Senbi's voice interrupted them. "She needs rest. Come back after you've both had some sleep; you can talk then."

Diana was asleep before the two men were out of the room.

The doctor steered Apollo toward the corridor. "Go away, Captain, and get some sleep yourself. We'll take good care of her, I assure you."

"I'm not leaving. She might wake up..."

Senbi sighed in exasperation. "I swear, we can't put one of you in here without the other falling ill within the day! All right! The next chamber's empty; you can sleep there, and you'll be close by if she needs you. You'll probably get to her before we do!"

"She lost the baby?"

It was Alexandra. "Yes," Apollo replied, "but she's all right."

"For now."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You said you were willing to die for her, for your child, for your friends, like Starbuck. Well, Starbuck's dead, and now, so's the baby." She shrugged. "Who knows? Maybe everybody you were willing to die for has to die first. The punishment of the gods..."

Badly shaken, Apollo asked Doctor Lupus for a sedative; he knew he wouldn't sleep without it.

"Damn!" the doctor muttered, watching Apollo retire to get some rest. "So soon after Starbuck... It's a lot for people to have to endure. Marriages have been ruined by less..." His fingers absently stroked the green gem that dangled from his right earlobe.

"It wasn't his Ila," someone said.

Lupus stared around the deserted room, certain he'd heard a voice, but he saw no one. Besides, the voice had sounded like... No way! I'm imagining things!

And who is Ila...?

"It wasn't Ila," the same quiet voice murmured at Apollo's bedside. "This one wasn't meant to be. Aley, how could you say that to him, now, of all times? How could you be so cruel?"

\* \* \* \* \*

Alexandra wandered aimlessly for a long time. She needed a quiet place to be alone, to sit and think things through. She was officially listed as a non-combatant, thanks to Apollo, so she didn't have patrols to fly, but she could still work in Sentiology, or Archives; they were both perpetually under-staffed.

But for now, she just wanted to be alone, to sit and think, and maybe let a little of the grief drain away. Maybe just sitting and doing nothing...

Instinct carried her to her Viper, but it wasn't really "hers" any more...

"Alex? Did you come this way?"

Alexandra stuck her head out of the niche she'd found. Her cousin Galatea was glancing around the launch bay, looking for her.

"I'm here, Gally. What is it?" She was weary, but was even more tired of her own thoughts than of others, and her cousin could sometimes be a welcome companion.

Galatea smiled, and hurried toward her. As usual, her sandy hair had worked its way free of its restraining knot, and a streak of lubricant was smeared across her sleeve. As she turned, looking for a place to sit, Alexandra saw a similar stain on her trousers.

The niche was small for two women -- but no smaller than a Cylon Raider carrying five Colonial Warriors, three of them injured.

"You don't look very happy," Galatea observed, seeing the shadows under Alexandra's eyes. "You look tired. Have you slept lately?"

"Not much," she replied, leaning back against the wall. "I think I'm scared to sleep much."

"Why?" Gally asked in undisguised interest. "Thinking of Starbuck? And how it was between you? He was always a charming sort; I remember him from when he was dating Athena. Baleron says you're probably the first woman he never dumped, because he never got the chance. There was a time when they were both still seeing Athena..."

Alexandra wanted to kick someone -- Baleron for making the comment, Galatea for repeating it -- and Starbuck, too, because it just might be true. She had to forgive Gally's tactlessness, though; things just slipped out sometimes.

Instead, she said, "You believe the words of a man who used to throw darts at Starbuck's picture? He didn't know Starbuck as well as he thought he did. I knew him back then, too. But it's not just Starbuck. I was thinking about Apollo and Diana, too."

Gally nodded in understanding. "They've been through a lot."

"Not quite like me," she replied bitterly. "They're both still alive, and they've got each other, for whatever it's worth."

"You're doing it again, Alex," her cousin scolded, innocently overlooking possible repercussions.

"Doing what again?"

"Blaming somebody for something that's not their fault. Refusing to admit it's your own feelings. Brooding over something nobody could do anything about. Like when your parents died. You couldn't face blaming yourself, so you blamed us. You didn't realize it was inside you all the time, so you couldn't face it..."

"Shut up, Gally," Alexandra snapped. "That's not it, not this time. You weren't there, you don't know..."

She shrugged. "If you say so. But I still don't think it's Apollo's fault. I think you should talk to him..."

"You should at least talk to somebody. I guess you don't want it to be me, though, so I guess I'll go finish my Viper. I think I've figured out something for that circuit that keeps shorting... And you were right; Rhea can get just about anything I need, or make it, in

Engineering. Almost as good as Jones. Come and see us later, if you want to. We'll probably be in the lounge."

Alexandra sat by herself for a while after Galatea left. She didn't want to admit her cousin might be right about her problem of perspective.

It's not just in my mind; it can't be! Starbuck's dead! Ibils killed him, and Apollo just stood there, and I couldn't help!

Who deserved her hatred more? Maybe she should just hate everybody, she thought wearily.

Later... I'll worry about it later. Right now, I need sleep...

But was it as easy as Gally made it seem? Would purging her own anger and guilt make Apollo seem less guilty, or Diana less tragic? Would Starbuck's death be easier to live with? Could she accept his child without reservations, as a blessing, instead of something forced upon her, unplanned, perhaps unwanted? What would a child mean to her now, in her profession, at this time in her life?

Hating wasn't healthy, she knew -- but getting rid of that hate was anything but easy.

She reached her quarters and dropped down on her bunk, still considering with longing how easy it would be to let go of her hatred, wishing she could just let it go. Sleep came quickly, for her exhausted body demanded it, and even her mind had reached the end of coherent thought.

"That's a good start, Aley," she thought she heard someone say as she fell asleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

Apollo wasn't able to sleep long. As activity increased in Life Centre, he, too, was soon awake. But his impatient pacing and constant questions soon made the doctors eager to order him out of their medical station.

He needed something to do.

Like Alexandra, he soon found himself in the launch bay. Hannibal was working on one of the Raiders, his major occupation when he wasn't teaching pilots how to fly them. No one else was around.

Apollo hesitated. There were things he wanted to discuss with Hannibal; the enigmatic older man had often puzzled him, and with their shared experience...

"Mind if I bother you?"

Hannibal waved toward him. "Find yourself a seat. Nothing here I need to concentrate fully on, so we can chat, if you like."

The young Captain knew how deceptive the Engineer's communicative mood could be. Nevertheless, he sat down on one of the Viper mounts near the Raider. He didn't realize the pose was one he'd often assumed in his childhood, when he'd listened to so many of his father's tales. The metal was cool, and he leaned back against the railing, letting his legs dangle freely.

Hannibal calmly closed a circuit panel. "Ship's almost ready to go. Are you making a bid to get back into the training program?"



"Uh, in case you've forgotten, I already know how to fly one of these things; I've done it before," Apollo replied with a smile.

"Tsk, tsk, tsk. Not to demean the Flight Commander in front of no one in particular, but I've been flying these things since before you were born. And, as Commander Christopher has put me in charge of our little training program, with Major Jason's blessings, I think that gives me a little say in whether or not you'll be declared competent to fly a Cylon Raider."

Apollo had to laugh at the man's mock-serious waving of a spanner in his general direction, but he sensed a serious undertone to the words, and was aware of the iron will backing them. It was good to laugh again -- but some of the things Hannibal had tossed off so freely made him wonder. He was more sensitive than most to things left unsaid -- and Hannibal had left many things unsaid.

"Y'know, Captain, I don't really know much about you," he began tentatively. "I sort of trust you, but don't really know why. You've been to Hades with me, and brought me back from there, but that's not it. What is it about you? You know too much, about too many people and places and things. You've done too much. I shouldn't trust you..."

"True," the older man replied, staring intently at Apollo. "If you had any sense at all, you wouldn't trust me as far as you could throw me -- which, if I recall, isn't very far. At least, not when you're...distracted. But, because you know better, you trust your instincts. It's not me you trust; it's yourself. That, you can trust."

Reassurance and strength flowed from the other man, not the kind of friendship Apollo recognized in Morgan, but something else, something deep and trustworthy -- but something not to be crossed.

The younger Warrior hoped he'd never have cause to cross Hannibal in anything; the man would be a dangerous adversary. He tried to find words to answer, remembered the business of relearning to fly a Raider, and grinned, suddenly seeing the hidden humour in the Engineer's carefully arranged, unconcealed -- but concealing -- life-style. So many secrets were hidden there -- and he wanted to learn them. But maybe it was best to let them lie for now.

"All right, Instructor, sir. When do I get back in this ship for a solo flight -- which I will pass with flying colours?"

Hannibal laughed freely. "After you've checked out in a multiple-personnel test. In your case, I'd say take Morgan for copilot. Contrary to your opinion, he has not been spending all his time this past sector sitting around and doing nothing. He's already soloed, and has checked out perfectly -- as is to be expected from a pilot of his calibre."

"Right." Apollo grimaced. Compared to Morgan again! "How nice to know you have such faith in me."

They regarded each other for a suddenly uncomfortable moment. Apollo felt himself on the brink of something momentous. "Uh, Captain, about that stranger, Count Iblis..."

"Iblis is no stranger to mankind, Apollo. You know that. I've encountered his work before, elsewhere, but never the being himself. You're lucky. He's a dangerous adversary -- but an even deadlier ally. What truly amazes me is that you've survived his rage -- not just once, but three times."

The younger man swallowed hard and looked down at the floor. He couldn't find anything to say -- but he desperately wanted to hear more.

"We're all free to choose our own destinies to a certain extent, for good or ill, but this I know, in all the uncertainty and briefness of human existence: We weren't put into this universe to live or die at the whim of a creature like Iblis. His free will shouldn't interfere with ours. Our purpose is higher than that. I don't know what happens next, but Iblis isn't our destiny. He said we belonged together. He may be right, but we don't belong with him. Beyond death..."

Apollo looked up again. "I remember hearing some of that before," he began faintly. "You're beginning to sound like my father, you know that?"

"Adama is a wise man," the Engineer commented. "You're a lot like him -- and you'll undoubtedly become more so, with time, if you don't let matters like this colour your thoughts and darken your judgement. And you have to be careful to stay your own person, to remain unique..."

"You know my father?" He was learning more than he'd expected...

"Yes," the older man replied casually.

Apollo waited expectantly for a long moment. "Very well?" he prompted.

Hannibal shrugged. "Well enough, and probably better than necessary. I'm not surprised he was suspicious of the Cylon 'peace' offer. He understood them very well -- and, more importantly, he understands humanity, and himself."

"You worked together?" Anything to do with his father was important to him now, when they had been apart so long. "When could that have been? What were you doing? You were never on the GA-LACTICA, and I don't remember Father ever mentioning you. You weren't in the records..."

"Records never tell everything, Captain; you should know that by now. The thing Adama and I worked on together was...not on public record. Can you let it go at that, or do you insist on knowing more?"

Those keen eyes were fixed on his, and Apollo moistened his lips before speaking again. "I would like to know more, but if you can't tell me, I'll have to accept it. Is there anything you can tell me?"

Hannibal studied his spanner. "Your father was never officially part of my assigned tasks," he finally said, "but if you learn to trust someone to a certain extent, they can be of invaluable help in...certain duties. I can't say much more than that now; I couldn't even say this little if we were back in the Colonies. Come by my quarters some time, though, if you wish, and we'll talk about it more." The eyes bored into him. "Don't give me cause not to trust you, Captain," he said flatly.

"You trusted my father. He must have trusted you," Apollo said. "I hope that trust remains, and becomes mutual with us, too." Good Lords, he felt frightened! It was a heady feeling -- as if he were a small boy just initiated into a secret club, with a bigger boy threatening dire consequences if he violated some nonsensical rule...

"As far as Iblis is concerned, I don't know why he left, or where he went..." the Engineer mused, absently tossing his spanner from hand to hand.

The small gesture held Apollo's gaze; he stared unblinkingly at the tool passing back and forth between the man's hands. "He left with his own people," he replied in a low voice. "He had to stand punishment for violating their laws, the laws of some greater power -- maybe even what we

understand as...God.

"He wasn't supposed to kill Starbuck." He was fidgeting now -- still the small boy, or maybe the green Cadet, facing his first debriefing. "Starbuck's still here -- not alive, but he says he's not really dead, either, as true death goes..."

There was no expression on Hannibal's face, and Apollo wondered if the other man believed him insane. Maybe I am...

He licked his lips again. "I don't understand it myself," he confessed, plunging on. "I don't even know if he'd want you told." It was a blundering confession, in response to everything the Engineer had already told him. "I don't know anything about it at all. Maybe I'm hallucinating, and Morgan with me, because I don't want to face his death. But I've...seen him, and talked with him. And it's...easier, somehow..." He was blubbing like a fool. Hannibal would think him a lunatic, and any hope of trust between them would be gone forever.

"I see," the older man said gravely. He sat down beside Apollo. "So Starbuck is still with us. I wondered."

"You believe me?"

"I know of no reason why you should lie. And, somehow, it all makes a great deal of sense."

"You don't think I'm crazy?" He felt greatly relieved.

"I told you, I've encountered Iblis' work before. No, I don't think you're crazy. His people, the ones from that other dimension..."

"You've met them, too!" Apollo breathed, barely able to contain his excitement. Hannibal had met them, too, those beings who'd once given him back his life, who had once "borrowed" him to stop a war! He knew the entities who'd saved their lives now, if Starbuck was right!

"Long ago -- and I have wished to meet them again, ever since. They said things that are only impressions now... Perhaps humanity has a chance in spite of the Cylons. They may be directing us, to make up for what Iblis did on Cylon..." His quiet words and distant gaze were filled with introspection, and the glance he levelled at Apollo was full of respect. "We must always keep on trying; there is always hope. Very few men know if they have triumphed or failed until after their Judgement -- and they usually can't come back to tell us. I think maybe Starbuck... Never mind." He rose abruptly.

"You think what?" Apollo demanded. What did the Beings tell him? He can't stop now! I've got to know... He wanted to know more, had to hear what this man knew.

"It'll have to wait," Hannibal told him in an undertone. "There's a team due for a Raider test flight in a few centons, and I believe the dynamic duo approaches even now. Later, Apollo. Count on it."

Apollo watched as two of Green Squadron's pilots received their pre-flight checks and were given a launch okay. Hannibal was no ordinary officer. He was certain the man had once belonged to the Intelligence Service, and his lifetime of experience, those special bits of wisdom gleaned from the cosmic Ship of Lights, could help him make sense of his own life, now -- even more, perhaps, than Starbuck's newly-found, other-worldly comments. Starbuck's existence was consolation -- but Hannibal's knowledge might help him understand as well as accept. He marvelled to rediscover a peaceful, questing something inside, that put his world into better order. Diana and Morgan will

understand...

Quiet laughter — Starbuck's voice. His friend was leaning against the Viper mount. "I'd feel miffed at your choice of mentors, if it weren't the truth," he commented genially. "He probably still knows more than I do! But I'd be careful with him, with what you ask, and how, and when. He's not gonna spoon-feed you anything!"

That's certainly true! Apollo laughed at the mental image of himself in swaddling-clothes at Hannibal's feet. It was as silly a picture in his mind as it would be in real life — but he loved it.

"Perhaps tormentor might turn out a better choice of words," the Lieutenant continued. "After all, he's just reduced you to the same position you've put so many Cadets and Junior officers in — young pups with their dignity and self-confidence kicked out from under them with a word or a glance — never me, of course," he finished virtuously.

Apollo couldn't keep a straight face, and he certainly couldn't find any words to scold Starbuck for his bold comments. It felt too good to laugh again.

Hannibal let his trainees launch with only a minimum of instruction. He could hear Apollo laughing at something...

A private joke? He glanced back at the young Warrior, who was still seated on the mount steps, leaning back, seeming to be talking to someone. His own eyes narrowed as he studied the scene.

Apollo wasn't crazy. That, he was sure of — he knew the signs, the situation, and he'd known Adama well enough to be able to recognize impending insanity in his offspring. So there must be a reason...

It hit him with quiet impact. Starbuck. He couldn't see the man(?), but he could feel him — something in the air, maybe. Starbuck was there.

Interesting...

Also interesting was his own reaction to revealing parts of his past to Apollo's scrutiny. There was no longer any reason to keep those yahrens a secret — the Colonies were gone; Commander Christopher and a select few others knew of his activities with intelligence; he had no real enemies on this ship, except for a few witless clods in Security. But, instead of letting the past lie, instead of being entirely above-board with Apollo, he was treating Adama's son like a potential recruit. Hardly a proper field activity, under the circumstances...

With a puzzled sigh, he ran a hand through his curly, grey-flecked hair. The Lords knew Apollo didn't need to be taken under anybody's wing, not with his ability, experience, and maturity...

A second thought hurt worse than the first, and was a more intense blow to his emotions. Every man wanted to accomplish something in his life, to leave a legacy to someone who would care. Something assured him that, more than anyone else he knew, Apollo would appreciate the shadowy legacy he would leave. For a brief moment, he was deeply jealous of Adama, that such a son would be part of his legacy to humanity...

\* \* \* \* \*

Alexandra stretched, yawning drowsily. She felt better, but there was no reason to hurry out of



bed; she wasn't due anywhere for a long time.

Old habits died hard.

She mused on her options while showering. Sentiology complained about being perpetually understaffed, although the most pressing need for adequate staffing had ended with the conclusion of the OSIRIS's mission and the Destruction of the Colonies. Still, she knew Tanis had enough respect for her abilities to give her some worthwhile project.

Major Meret would probably be pleased to have extra assistance in Archives, as well -- although it would likely be Tanis's work she'd be doing; his projects always expanded to take up twice the number of work centers his personnel could supply. But it would keep her busy with something she could find an interest in. The very thought of going into Civilian Services was nauseating -- she'd probably be stuck in the Commissary, like Lieutenant Trav had been during her pregnancy!

Her earlier interest in the day waned fast; disinterest in any of her possible choices rapidly left her as apathetic as the day before. She made a face at the mirror as she wrapped herself in a towel, then padded back to her bed for the uniform she'd laid out.

"Aley, I think we ought to have a talk."

She whirled about in shock, stared for a moment at the image of Starbuck standing before her, and promptly fainted.

\* \* \* \* \*

The session was grueling; more than once, Morgan was tempted to smash his fists against the deck and give up. Allahara, with her huntress's instincts, probed and found weak spots in every telepathic shield he tried to set against her. She tried to be kind, but each failure only frustrated him more -- and made him more determined to succeed the next time. She was indefatigable, willing to keep working long after Garnyd uneasily suggested he was overworking himself.

But, at last, he managed to hold a barrier against her telepathic scan for almost half a centon; that victory, minor though it was, made the threesome call it a day. Allahara's stomach was growling for a haunch of something fresh and juicy, so a quick silent compliment on his progress was all she sent back to the two humans as she padded out the door of the commandeered Cultural Survey briefing room.

The men chose to shower and change clothes before heading to the pilots' lounge for a drink in celebration. Afterwards, Garnyd planned to catch a nap before a scheduled patrol. Morgan intended to find Apollo, and check on Diana.

"You're doing well," Garnyd commented, carefully glancing around to be sure they were unobserved. "Took me a lot longer to learn telepathic shielding."

"You don't trust anyone, do you, expect maybe Hannibal -- and not always him," Morgan observed with attempted casualness. Garnyd had always avoided him like some kind of plague, and only Hannibal's "suggestion" had convinced the other man to help him. They were still far from becoming friends, but each had begun to appreciate the other's abilities and character.

"I don't have much choice about trusting you with this, do I?"

"You've nothing to fear from me. If I gave you away, I'd be giving myself away as well," the telepath countered. Damn! I hate making this sound like blackmail! "And I think that by now,

you know I can keep a secret." He was uncomfortable with the discussion.

So, it appeared, was Garnyd. "Secrets? You know mine. I've never been in your mind, but you've been in mine, to find what you needed to know to rebuild your defences. I've never let anyone do that before, not even... Never mind. Wouldn't it disturb you to know somebody was tramping through your private thoughts and memories?"

Morgan shuddered. That was exactly what Ibils had done... "I see what you mean," he stated flatly. "It's been done to me -- against my will. That's why I need your help, for the moment, at least -- although I hope we can be friends later. And I've never looked into your private thoughts; they're none of my business."

The other man seemed relieved, and the telepath had to resist an impulse to do as he had sworn not to.

"You buying the first round?"

"Sure. Why not?" Morgan, too, was relieved.

In the lounge, Robin flagged them down before they could get settled. "Hey, Morgan! Your friend Captain Apollo was just here, looking for you. He and Alexandra left -- headed for Life Centre, I think."

"Thanks, Robin." He turned to his companion. "I suppose I'd better find him." Together? Apollo and Alexandra? From what I understood, they're not exactly on the best of terms these days...

"Go ahead," Garnyd insisted. "I'll join some of the others." He grabbed a mug of ale and headed toward a corner table, where several bolsterous members of Purple Squadron were noisily celebrating someone's birthday.

Morgan left to look for Apollo.

\* \* \* \* \*

Apollo kept a cautious eye on Alexandra. She'd seemed nervous when she'd found him in the pilots' lounge and asked to talk to him. He still wasn't sure what she wanted.

After a few perfunctory questions about Diana and Morgan, she'd been silent, except for brief responses to his own questions, as often as not so tangential to what he'd said that he knew she was only half-listening.

He knew her rapid stride as they walked was a mark of agitation -- the more uneasy she was, the faster she tended to walk and speak. He kept up with her easily, but wondered when she'd get around to bringing up whatever it was she wanted to talk about.

Realizing neither of them had spoken for a full centon, he tried to force the issue. "Uh, Alex," he began, "Is there something important you needed to talk about?"

She licked her lips before responding. "I notice you've had me removed from the flight rosters."

He knew she was evading the real issue. "You informed me you were pregnant, the other day...in Starbuck's quarters. Was I...incorrect in assuming you intend to keep the child? If I am, we can change your status again..."

She has to keep the baby; I'll try to talk her into it if necessary... Diana had lost his child, but there was no reason to lose Starbuck's as well...

He caught himself in shock as he followed the course of his own thoughts. He had no right to interfere in her choice. She wasn't his wife -- and Diana had made it quite clear that such a decision belonged only to the people involved.

"No," she replied hastily. "I'm keeping the baby; that wasn't the point. I...didn't remember I'd told you... Other things on my mind, I guess..."

"Was there something else, then?" At this point, he wouldn't have been surprised by another bitter denunciation; indeed, he half expected it. He was prepared to deal with it -- but she wasn't acting like she planned to turn on him, and he couldn't quite figure out her intent.

She shrugged, opened her mouth, then closed it again, taking a deep breath. "Ummm..."

"Something you said the other day? I realize your...condition and the situation could have left you temporarily...distracted. I think we can make some allowances, if that's what you're concerned about..."

She stared at him with relief, although she tried to cover it with outrage. "Don't patronize me, Captain. Hysteria's not usually considered a legal defence for mouthing off to one's superior. And I'd like to leave my 'condition' out of this!" She took another deep breath. "I'm glad that you're willing to let this slide, but actually, I owe you an apology, as much for the things I thought as for the little I said. And that's why I had to talk to you, among other reasons... Oh, this isn't coming out right at all!"

He raised his eyebrows in silent question, but waited patiently.

She closed her eyes a moment, then stopped walking and abruptly turned to face him. He had to take a step backward to return to her side.

"Captain," she began quite formally, "I'm afraid I've had some totally incorrect ideas about what happened...when Starbuck died. Maybe my condition is part of it, after all. But for the past few sections, I've had some very cruel ideas about your role in his death -- and those notions were totally unfounded, and very unflattering to you. I know you would've done something to save him if you could. I didn't understand..."

"The situation is much clearer now, thanks to time, and a...friend's explanation. I hope you'll accept my apologies, and I hope my misconceptions don't destroy whatever friendship we might have had."

The long speech over, she closed her mouth quite firmly and gazed straight at him, trepidation evident in her eyes.

Apollo blinked as he considered the possible implications of her words. She'd obviously thought him in some way responsible for Starbuck's death -- and he was, of course, in one sense. Iblis had come for him, and Starbuck had paid the price for his redemption. But Starbuck was still with them, in one form...

She said a "friend" explained...!

"You've seen him," he stated.



"Yes..." She looked down for a moment, then began to walk again, her arms crossed, much more at ease. "We had a long talk, and he explained a lot of things that weren't clear to me before. I misjudged you; you were right about that."

"Is that why you're keeping the baby?"

She shook her head, and he could see a hint of a smile. "No, I'd've kept it anyway. Even if Starbuck had lived, and we'd split up because of it... We were both very young at the Academy -- however mature and on top of the universe we thought we were, however bright we saw our futures to be. And I was so inexperienced... We're a little older now, and life looks a lot tougher from here. And looking ahead..." She shrugged. "I've never been especially domestic-minded -- I like the excitement and adventure bit -- but I've always said I'd try anything once. Even maternity. Maybe some day... Well, for now, I love Starbuck, and you never know about the future..."

A crewman passed within earshot and nodded a greeting. They acknowledged his presence, and waited until he was gone before continuing.

"Actually, Apollo," Alexandra said quietly, "it suddenly seems like a very good time to begin a family, to have somebody. My own family's been gone for so long, and there isn't anything left for me except memories -- and they all end rather violently. Now, there'll be something to look forward to -- a family, a real future."

"A hostage to fortune?" He thought of his own past, and a dead woman who'd once said something like that. Take what we can, while we can...

"That's one way of looking at it," she answered thoughtfully. "But there can be so much good, and even joy, in the future, that I'll risk a little pain. It's worth it, to have that stake, especially now, when everything seems so bleak and empty... He helps make that clear, just by still being here, the way he is -- so much like the way he was... It's worth the risk. He took it, and died -- and he still thinks so. I'm going to look forward, and expect better days. Or is this getting to be so much metaphysical philosophical double-talk that doesn't mean anything?"

He felt a laugh building inside. "I understand very well," he replied with heartfelt sincerity. "I'm willing to take that risk, too, I guess, and hope for the future. But it wasn't to be, not this time. Fortune stood against it..." And Diana's unwillingness, but maybe some time soon... "Just let me know if you need anything, a helping hand, a shoulder to cry on, somebody to stand by you. I owe Starbuck a great deal, for a lot of reasons, and I'm willing to be a stand-in as an uncle, or whatever you and your child need."

She smiled widely, and he thought he saw tears in her eyes. "Thanks a lot, Apollo. It means more than you know." Her voice was a little husky.

"Hey, Apollo!"

They glanced back, to see Morgan hurrying toward them.

"I'll let you talk," Alexandra said quietly, and vanished into Life Centre as Apollo waited for his friend to catch up to him. The blond telepath seemed a bit breathless, as if he'd run some distance.

"What did she want?" was Morgan's first question. Apollo stared in puzzlement. "Why'd she leave so fast?"

"Well, you were calling me," Apollo stated. Then he grinned. "The curse is transferred," he in-

toned pompously. "Now, people are leaving me when you show up, instead of the other way around. Why were you in such a hurry?"

"I thought you two were only on insult terms."

"We're over that. Everything's fine."

"Oh?"

"Uh-huh. Diana's going to be all right; Alexandra's keeping her baby; Hannibal's still Hannibal; Starbuck will continue to be a thorn in my side. And you're getting the help you need. What more could I want?" Apollo asked gaily, with a teasing smile.

"I see. Everything's just grand. And how much do you know about our friend Hannibal?"

"Enough," was the cheerful reply. "And I expect to know more."

The telepath was taken aback. "You know he was in intelligence? If you're going to be spending much time with him, you ought to realize..."

"I guessed as much. Garnyd, too?"

"Uh..."

"Oh, right, you don't talk about him. He does his own talking, and not often. That's fine by me. Right now, the universe is a place I am most content to live in. If only Starbuck were really still alive, and we could find the GALACTICA..."

"Hold it! Hold it!" Morgan laughed. "Don't start enumerating the things we need to make life perfect. You'll just depress us both. And speaking of our Starbuck and Alexandra..."

"She knows. He told her."

"What about Diana?"

Apollo frowned. "She doesn't know yet. And I don't plan on saying anything for the time being. Wait until she gets out of Life Centre..."

"Why do you Warriors always talk as if Life Centre's a prison sentence of some sort?" an exasperated voice remarked. "And do you realize you're blocking the doorway? If you will please excuse me..." Doctor Lupus stalked past the two men and entered Life Centre.

"I wonder what he heard..." Morgan began cautiously, watching the doctor's retreating back.

"I don't know, but this is a rather public place. Let's go visit Diana."

Alexandra and the Senior Medical Officer of the OSIRIS were with Diana when they arrived at her private chamber. The doctor was chuckling uncharacteristically, while the women stared at each other in a disconcerted manner.

"You mean..." Diana finally said, sitting up in bed.

"Major Jason is going to have somebody's hide," Doctor Senbl replied, with an amused snort.

"Why? What's going on?" Apollo ventured to intrude. He stood behind Alexandra's chair, leaning over her shoulder. Morgan remained in the doorway.

"We've discovered the cause of the recent rash, as it were, of unintended pregnancies among female personnel who've been very conscientious in the maintenance of their contraceptive programs."

"And?" Morgan prompted.

"We've traced it, as I said. The common denominator in all cases is M'dori."

The men stared, as dumbfounded as the women.

"We analyzed several samples after discovering the liquor's possible complicity in the matter, and it has been confirmed. Someone tampered with a batch of Jason's most prized distillation -- added an aphrodisiac, according to our tests. Unfortunately, one side effect of this particular chemical, taken in conjunction with this particular alcohol, is the total nullification of our contraceptives."

The doctor was interrupted by a spontaneous outburst of laughter from the two male Warriors, to which both female Warriors responded with angry glares. He raised an eyebrow mischievously. "I'm glad someone else is enjoying this. Most of the women have reacted rather, um, badly to the news. Now that the diagnosis has been confirmed, I must contact the Major at once, so the matter can be properly dealt with. Enjoy your visit, gentlemen, but don't wear the lady out."

\* \* \* \* \*

Aware that the young Warrior was brooding, and was convinced his lost child was a girl -- Why else the name Ila? -- Doctor Lupus stopped Apollo as he left his wife's chamber; Diana was asleep. "Oh, Captain, there's something I think you might like to know. We completed our chromosome tests. The child was male."

"No question about it?" he asked faintly.

"It was quite early in the pregnancy, but, no, there's no question."

He never noticed when the doctor left him. It wasn't Ila! It was not meant to be! He leaned against the wall and closed his eyes; his relief was haunted by grief. It wasn't meant to be...

\* \* \* \* \*

Apollo's tears were scalding as they brimmed from his reddened eyes, running down his cheeks to spill into his hands as he wept in the silent security of the celestial chamber. But they were healing tears, washing away pain without guilt, relieving his aching heart. He'd finally given in to his own sorrow -- and it was a good feeling. It had taken so long to simply let himself feel his grief, to find this healthy outlet for it...

He cried privately.

He mourned the loss of Diana's child. It had been a son, not the daughter he'd so looked forward to, anticipated from some long-past dream. Perhaps this son was never meant to be, since Diana wasn't ready, and he had never foreseen the child. Maybe it was his own eagerness for a stake in this life, as Alexandra had put it, that made this child so important to him. But he could let go of it now, and look to the future, knowing the day would come when his hopes would be fulfilled. For the present, he could only say good-bye in this simple way, and wish things had been other-

wise.

And Starbuck... How do I feel about Starbuck? It was wrenching to remember how his friend had died, sacrificing all to save him. But he's still here, in some strange way that at times can frighten me...

He should be gone! How does one deal with a...ghost, a...spirit? He's dead...

That fact couldn't be changed, had to be dealt with. He remembered his first reaction -- the dreamy, relieved acceptance, as if everything would go on just as it had before. It was a totally unrealistic view of things. Now, he saw it more clearly, could face Starbuck's death squarely, despite the emotional pain.

Every time Iblis appeared, his own existence underwent a drastic change -- a change in goals, perspectives, hopes, even life-style and position. And the Ship of Lights came, too, with its other-worldly beings and its frightening reassurances. Is it logical to trust beings with such power, so far in advance of our own people and culture...?

Starbuck's memory of previous encounters with them was clearer now, and he tried to explain that other dimension, from his own experiences there, but Apollo instinctively shied away from what his friend said. He'd met them before, too -- but, perhaps, mortal beings were not meant to know or understand those entities. It's better they remain an enigma, awe-inspiring, beyond comprehension by beings like us...

Meanwhile, tears could ease his pain. Diana's enduring love and Morgan's special friendship would be anchors, and duty -- to this ship, and, soon, to Starbuck's child -- would be responsibility enough to ensure him a purpose in life. His destiny would be met and fulfilled, whatever it might be, for however long he lived.

Eventually, his tears ceased, and he sat back in his chair to contemplate the stars all around him, observing the beauty of the universe. Stars of all ages, fulfilling their given destinies, for purposes unknown to a mystified humanity... Points of light and colour, some surrounded by worlds, life, laughter; others barren, alone and silent...

His cleansing introspection was shattered by the sound of someone at the hatch. He'd left the entrance locked. When it opened easily, and the roar of the battleship's engines slammed into his ears, he knew the visitor had to be Morgan; only the telepath's kinetic abilities could force the lock so readily. The noise and light were gone in an instant; in the ensuing darkness, he heard Morgan's quiet movements as his friend joined him.

"Hello, Morgan." His voice was calm, but still held a trace of huskiness from the previous centar's tears.

"Figured I'd find you here."

Apollo heard a clinking sound, followed by the slosh of liquid being poured. He shook with smothered laughter. "My own medicine?" he asked lightly.

"Worked for me, so why not?"

"Sure it's safe?"

"I think so."

Apollo slipped out of the chair and joined Morgan on the floor. His friend passed him a glass; a taste confirmed that it contained some of Major Jason's special M'dori, doctored for the occasion. They drank in amiable silence for several centons.

"Not bad," Apollo ventured into the darkness. The starlight was dim; he could barely make out his companion's silhouette against one of the chamber's clear panels. The moment was eerily similar to a previous one, when he'd tried to console Morgan after the frightening violation in Iblis' cavern.

"Not bad at all. When's Diana getting out?"

"Later today."

"Mmm... Plan on locking yourself up here forever?" Morgan mimicked.

"Not at all. As a matter of fact, I've probably spent all the time here I need to." Apollo leaned back against the side of the chair. "I'd forgotten, these past sections, just how soothing it is to sit here and watch the universe go by."

"To our shared retreat, then," Morgan toasted, and they drank in peaceful silence for a time before the Lieutenant spoke again, hesitantly. "Apollo, what in Hades happens next?"

"What do you mean?"

"Iblis and the Ship of Lights have haunted you for yahrens. Even with Iblis gone, as Starbuck assures us, banned from harming you, or any of us, by their decree, are those...entities...directing our lives? Are we puppets in some game of theirs? I've never met them; you and Starbuck have. Why do they care what happens to us?"

Apollo thought carefully for a moment before answering. "They'll never interfere with our free will. Starbuck's still with us because of Iblis' actions, and their wish to make things right again, as much as they can. They were like us, once..."

"What happens next? I don't know. I don't know if they're directing us; I don't know if they can, if they're allowed... They'd never do us harm; that, I'm sure of..."

"They can't direct us unless we're willing to hear them, and still retain responsibility for our choices," Starbuck said clearly. Apollo and Morgan were both sufficiently accustomed to his sudden appearances that neither man betrayed surprise in any way.

"Do you know what our destiny is, where we go from here, what role they'll play?" Apollo asked.

Shrugging, Starbuck knelt beside them. "No, I don't. And they've gone on, now, to their own dimension again, to watch, and wait. I can't even ask Angela; I tried once. I doubt she'd be allowed to tell me, even if she knew. But I think they'll do their best to guide us on the way to becoming like them -- in spirit, if not in form -- whether on Earth, or with the GALACTICA, or wandering in space forever. That's the way they are, I think."

"Embodiments of truth and wisdom?" Morgan queried. "Servants of the Highest Power? What are they, Starbuck?"

"They're not something I can explain in human terms," he responded. "I'm not even sure I understand them myself. They are...beyond human. But they can help guide us to our destinies. I guess that's why I'm still here. I've found my destiny..."

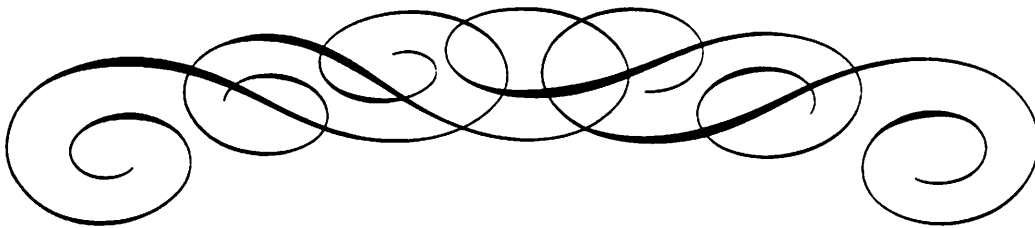


"And that's to help us find ours?"

Starbuck nodded at Apollo. "That's the best I understand of it. But I think that's what we all do, help each other along..."

Apollo's slow, thoughtful smile was reflected on Morgan's face. "My friend, thank you. I'm glad you're here," he said simply.

"Uh, not to bring this lofty conversation down to a really mundane level or anything, but that stuff looks good, buddies," Starbuck commented, eyeing the M'dori flask. "Mind if I join you?"



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